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# A/N

[image]

**Hello, everyone, and welcome to *Forgotten Legends*!**

Before we even begin, I must pause for a moment and thank you for taking the time out of your day to read this little adventure of mine. It is a novel, yes, but it is also a world that I have kept secluded inside for years. For the longest time, I did not know how to express myself. I never stood up for myself and I didn't understand how God intended for me to make a change in the world when I couldn't even raise my voice to express myself.

And then I discovered writing and it became my source of inspiration. Here, I found people (and dragons) with whom I could relate; I discovered a realm in which I could say exactly what I wanted to without fear of stammering, tripping over my words, or saying everything in the wrong order. This became my outlet, *my* way to make a difference, free of judgment and free of rejection.

My name is *Kat Wingfree* and I am a newly graduated college student (Class of 2022) with a passion for all things writing, adventure, superheroes, and dragons. I have a degree as an Occupational Therapy Assistant with a gear toward the pediatric population (birth-18 years of age) and that is the same range I scope for my novels. My stories have meaning, *purpose*, and lessons that I believe all people should understand; whether or not they were raised in such a fashion; kindness, respect, responsibility, loyalty, honesty, and so many more. My characters experience these same emotions, some for the first time, and along the way, they learn how to use these attributes to better the lives of their family, friends, and those around them.

That being said, this particular series is especially special to me. I have written so many stories, each unique and tailored for a particular purpose; however this collection of books (for this is the first of many planned down the line) speaks differently to both

myself and those who read it. The characters are more than just genre stereotypes and anime predictions; they are *part* of me. Each and every dragon you see within these pages is some kind of reflection of *me* and who I am as a person.  I am not a very vocal person when it comes to my hopes, dreams, and desires; I am so much more of a follower than a leader, so this is my way of...coming out and expressing myself in a way I have not yet learned to do outside of the pages.

For example; the main themes you see in this book belong to a drake who has serious doubts about his own capabilities and a fear of standing out. He doesn't want to be seen and he has tremendous anxiety when the time comes that he has to step up and be a leader.

But that won't stop him, and I won't let it stop me either.

This is my first book and the one I greatly desire to publish one day soon, so any comments and support would mean the absolute world to me. This is my second draft and I believe it is getting close to being completed for good, however, there will still be a few changes in the middle portion of the book and any constructive criticisms will be *strongly* taken into consideration.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to read my little pet project, and may the Winged Five guide you as you journey on...

< < < ***Things You Should Know Before Reading On*** > > >

1. *Forgotten Legends* is a tale that takes place in a faraway galaxy totally and completely separate from this planet and the events that have shaped our world. Any relations to actual history or events are entirely coincidental. The same goes for people or places; unless I approached you in person and *explicitly* asked your permission for you to be incorporated into the tale, any relation is pure happenstance.

2. Though I do tend to write in a calm and passive way, there are times when things can...escalate quickly. Please remember, these are dragons we are working with and dragons tend to have a more

aggressive nature. For that reason, this book is rated PG-13 for fantasy violence and occasional gore/death. *You have been warned.* Other than that, you should be in the clear. I do not curse and I do not delight in profanity so you will not find either of these here. I only ask that you respect that and please do not ask me to write such. I am *thrilled* that you enjoy the story that much, but please save that role for someone else.

3. I always interact with my readers, so, if by some circumstance, you do not see a reply from me, please do not panic, there are times when Wattpad will fail to alert me of notifications for a few days. Rest assured I *will* find them one way or another (even if it takes a while and I find them a year later while doing an edit).

< < < ***One Last Thing*** > > >

*"For man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." ~1 Samuel 16:7*

***A/N***

*(*) means the chapter has gone through final revisions. These are the chapters that I have rewritten since 2021 and you should notice a tremendous difference between what is there and what comes after. Please be patient. I will have it all edited in time :)*

# ~Dragnaple~

[image]

# Guide to the Tribes of Dragnaple*

***Raynbow***

**Height/Weight**: 10-11', 300-400 lbs

**Appearance/Abilities**: all colors of the rainbow, long narrow talons, wings have sparkles on the lower halves, can breathe fire.

**Live on:** Raynbowfalles

**Ruled by:** King Skydapple and Queen Glamorous

**Heirs**: Princess Cotton, Prince Boulder "Steel", Prince Fledgling

***Jungle***

**Height/Weight:** 10-11', 400-500 lbs

**Appearance/Abilities:** burly scales, thick talons, big tails. Usually brown, red, or green. Can breathe fire. Some are said to be gifted with the power of prophecy.

**Live on:** Starrlande

**Ruled by:** King Jaguar

**Heir:** Princess Harmony, Prince Forrest (estranged)

***Sea***

**Height/Weight**: 10-11', 200-400 lbs

**Appearance/Abilities**: smaller, sleeker bodies, bigger wings, webbed talons, gills, fish-like tails. Always black, green, purple, or brown. Can breathe hot jets of water as well as fire.

**Live on:** Watterlaek

**Ruled by**: King Flounder and Queen Starfish

**Heir:** Prince Current

***Desert***

**Height/Weight:** 11-12', 400-450 lbs

**Appearance/Abilities:** yellow or brown with blue eyes. They have smaller talons, larger fangs (which are rumored to contain poison), and thin tails. Can breathe fire.

**Live on:** Marblerivver

**Ruled by**: Queen Rattlesnake

**Heirs:** Princess Timberwolf, Prince Jackal

***Mountain***

**Height/Weight:** 10', 500-600 lbs

**Appearance/Abilities**: Massive with huge wings and stubby talons. Brown, gray, or black. Cannot breathe fire.

**Live on**: Monterra

**Ruled by**: King Swoop

**Heirs:** None

***Sky***

**Height/Weight**: 9-10', 300-400 lbs

**Appearance/Abilities**: Tall, thin with large wings and small talons. All colors are possible. Can breathe lightning and project it simultaniously from their wings.

**Live on:** Skyecloude

**Ruled by**: King Stratos and Queen Hurricane

**Heir**: Prince Gust

***Blue (extinct)***

**Height/Weight:** 10-11', 300-350 lbs

**Appearance/Abilities**: Blue scales, large wings, and the ability to read minds and predict the future. Last recorded blue dragon lived 500 years after the Blazing.

**Live on:** Unknown

**Ruled by**: Unknown

**Heirs:** Unknown

***Frost***

Extinct. No known data.

# The Defender Prophecy*

*When all the light seems far and gone,*

*When all the Realms feel dark and wrong,*

*After the rise of the darkest heart,*

*Five heroes shall rise to play their part:*

*A single heir of thunder and night,*

*On wings of power shall make his flight.*

*A daughter of fame and glory,*

*Shall find a new twist in her story.*

*One drake born of death and fire,*

*Shall discover the secret of a power higher.*

*A son descended from the very one,*

*Bestowed with power to raise the sun.*

*And last, a heart of power and skill;*

*A dragon born through great war and will.*

*Hatchlings of strength, magic, and might,*

*Come to stand against the night.*

*Five dragons to fight the fear,*

*Five heroes to save what all hold dear...*

# Prologue*

The moon shone down on the troop of dragons as they glided above the still forest.

At first appearance, they resembled a rugged assembly of outcasts, brought together by the ever-changing tide of battle and the need to survive in a vast and unfamiliar world. And, indeed, they were this. They were five dragons of five worlds with *one* destiny and a sole fate. Five breeds that *never* should have met, *hatched* and now *destined* to defy all laws. They were *warriors*. They were *heroes*. They were *Defenders* of the *Universe*. This was *their* turf.

And they did not take kindly to being invaded.

By *anyone*.

*Especially* some evil lizard with an *absurdly large* army of magical beings that should *in no reality* exist.

*So, why,* one dutiful, albeit reluctant, drake asked himself as his wings sliced the narrow space flanking his very being, where they all the way out here in the middle of *nowhere,* fighting a bunch of unearthly phantasms in the *first* place?

His head swiveled to a stern-faced dragoness pacing his speed on his right and he blinked remorsefully. Why weren't they back home in their cave, warming up beside a nice warm fire with hatchlings tumbling around at their talons? *Why* had he suggested they come on this mission to begin with?

And all for *what*? For a single egg that potentially did not exist in the first place?

"Stay alert," Clouddusk barked at them as they passed beyond a rocky clearing and ducked lower into the forest canopy. "They could have hidden it anywhere." His eyes flicked from the forest floor to the darkened heavens and in the distance, he could see the

mountains, their peaks jabbing forcefully into the sky. Further on lay the realm of darkness, where all creatures of malevolence belonged. It was their responsibility to make sure that such evil *remained* there.

*Because who* knows *what havoc the wickedness of this domain could reek upon the living world if it were given the opportunity.*

Clouddusk was determined to *never* find out.

Fanciful or not, they *had* to find this egg first. Before *they* did.

His team swept into the trees behind him, traveling in tight apprehension. At the rear of the group, the sky drake, Stormtail, eyed the lower foliage suspiciously. His wings crackled with electricity, in sync with the distant flashes of lightning dancing on the horizon. "How are we supposed to find *anything* here?" he exclaimed. "This forest is *endless*!"

This was not an exaggeration on his part, a fact that all five knew very well. The trees never actually ceased. They stretched on across the eternal plain, never ending and never thinning to welcome other biomes. It was simply another downside of the Dream Realm —an ever-existing land of melancholy and solitude for those who resided within, separated from the world of the living and the ones they were continuously tasked to protect.

"According to Gale's readings, the power surges from this part of the forest have been growing stronger by the day. They *must* have hidden it here. Come on, let's try this way." He tossed his head, and the others followed his lead.

"Clouddusk," Violettail spoke up. She pumped her wings and hastened to his side, ignoring the other drakes as they hissed and ducked out of her way. "I'm getting a *powerful* sense of a Blue's presence from just up ahead. I *think* we've found them."

Clouddusk nodded and flicked his tail, warning the others to move into position. Immediately, the dragons fanned out, holding their formation but distancing themselves for their own safety. *Here we go.*

Clouddusk signaled for Violet to stay alongside him. "Which way?" he demanded, already searching for the leafy bundle he knew *had* to be there...*somewhere*.

Violet twitched her ears for a moment, listening to the silence that infiltrated the night. "Right."

He growled. "We're here."

With no more warning than that, he curled his wings and dove from the air. The earth quickly rose to catch him but he paid no mind. He pulled out at the last possible moment, touching down gently against the padded forest floor and folded his appendages neatly against his ribs. Around him, he could hear the soft thumps of his team as they mimicked his actions and returned once more to their traditional formation.

"Well done, Violet. Eyes open," he warned, flicking his ears to signal separation once again. "If the Stars *are* hiding something, this is where it'll be." He stepped lightly amid the shrubbery, keeping his wings high so as not to alert their targets of their arrival.

"What exactly are we *hoping* to find?" Cyclone questioned as he and Violet pressed together defensively.

Clouddusk snorted a plume of opaque smoke. "The Great Storm is tonight," he answered as they trekked through the shadows, closer and closer to the looming darkness. The rumble of thunder stressed his point as lightning illuminated the tears of rain upon his glistening scales. "Thunder Star's egg will hatch soon. We should be there...*just* in case."

"Wait, *hold* on," Violet protested, snapping her head toward him, gold eyes wide with disbelief. "*That's* what we're here for? Some lunatic's *cursed hatchling*?" Her body was tense, her talons tightening against flimsy blades of scorched grass as she spoke, and her wings, slightly curled, pulsed with an unnatural, angry light.

Clouddusk sighed and went back to scanning the verdure. "In case you've *forgotten,"* he growled. "We've *also* felt the presence of another power in these woods for *weeks*. Darkwhisperer is too smart

to linger now. This is something *else*." *A forbidden egg. It's here somewhere.*

"So, *what*?" Violet argued, shooting her flanking teammates a frown. "We're just going to walk in, steal a hatchling who might be dangerous enough to destroy *all nine Realms,* and let it *live*? Clouddusk, are you *out* of your *mind*?"

Clouddusk ignored that. Yes, it was dangerous to pursue a creature containing such legendary power, *especially* when he knew *who's* egg it belonged to. Perhaps he *was* losing his touch, but *still,* there was something about this that he didn't--

He paused, feeling the air, before turning and hurdling a fallen tree. "*Wait*, can you feel that?" he asked. And then, before anyone could answer, "The pulses are getting stronger. We're almost there. *This* way."

"Are you *sure* about this?" Sparkwind growled as the group sprinted after their leader. With his heavier desert body, it was more difficult for him to traverse the landscape and Storm dropped back from the lead to help him over the wiry tentacles of the old oak. "*Thank* you. I mean, *not* that *I* think it's a stupid idea, but--"

"But it's a *stupid* idea," Violet cut him off, shooting the ocherous dragon a venomous glare. "Hunting for one of the most powerful eggs in all of Dragnaple? But *not* to kill it. To *protect* it. Oh *no*, what could *possibly* go wrong with *that* plan?"

Clouddusk grunted but gave no reply. He rounded a bend and emerged into a small ravine he'd seen from the air. His ears twitched and his head swiveled as a small noise caught his attention. His eyes fell on a small deformation in the rocky chasm. *Immediately* he knew they'd found it.

He held up his wings and the group halted. "This is it," he growled.

Cyclone glanced around his wings warily. "*Here*? Are you *sure*?"

"Yes." Cloudddusk understood what his teammate was thinking. He sensed it too. The clearing was too deserted...it was all *too* easy.

He'd anticipated the hollow would be swarming with dark magic, not entirely *abandoned.* But *there*, he felt it again; the tug of his magic, a pull toward that rocky crevice just out of reach. "It's here."

"*What*?" Violet snapped. Her head snaked around as she searched the shadows panickily. "*Where*?"

"Up there." Clouddusk nodded to the cliff, unfurling his wings before anyone could protest and kicking off. He landed a bit awkwardly on the ledge and signaled for his wary team to follow. The cave entrance was shrouded by vines which Clouddusk effortlessly brushed aside. He took a small step inside and what he saw caused him a moment's pause. Lying there, in a hastily constructed pile of moss and twigs, was a dark blue egg—the darkest he had ever seen—speckled with lighter blue splotches. "We *found* it," he breathed softly, just as the others crowded around on the ledge behind him.

He had just crouched down to investigate when he heard Violet's furious hiss and turned to find his team staring at the egg as though it carried some kind of horrible disease. "What are you all staring at?" Clouddusk snapped. "It's just an egg." And just to make his point, he wrapped a wing around it and pulled it protectively toward his body.

"You've got to destroy it!" Storm pleaded. "That's the egg of Thunder Star the Destroyer! It is an omen of destruction! It can bring nothing good to the Realms!"

"The egg is a '*he*', Storm," Clouddusk huffed. "Not an '*it*'." He clutched the slippery shell tightly. "While it's true that his father must pay for his crimes, this egg and the hatchling inside is innocent. He should not be held responsible for Thunder Star's arrogance."

Violet looked horrified. She took a small step backward, nostrils flaring, and wings opened irately. "You're not *serious*!" she hissed. "That creature should be destroyed *before* it has a chance to hatch! You let a monster like *that* loose and it'll destroy the universe!"

"You don't *know* that," Clouddusk shot back. "I don't sense any dark

magic in him. I don't think he's as dangerous as you think!"

"*HA*!" Violet scoffed. "And I suppose you think that means he won't be *anything* like his father either, right?"

"Not if *we* raise him properly," Clouddusk retorted. "We can *teach* him right from wrong, to walk the path of good. Hatchlings are no more like their parents than trout are like barracuda. *You* of all dragons should know that."

She glared at him through narrowed eyes. He promptly looked away and let his gaze travel from one teammate to the next. All shared the same emotions. There was *hope*, but there was also *fear*. How could a *blue dragon* ever be good when his kind was *unquestionably* born to destroy and rampage? What would stop him from becoming just like his father?

"Even if you *could* teach him to be good, who would be his guardian until his twentieth birthday? *No one* would be willing to take care of a *thing* like that," the sea dragoness reasoned. "*We* certainly can't care for him! He wouldn't be safe and *besides*—"

"I will raise him myself."

Violet blinked, her maw still hanging open from her ongoing protest. "*Y-you?* But, Clouddusk, you *know*—"

"If there's something you need to say, Violet," Clouddusk said monotonously, "*please* spit it out or let's take the egg and get out of here before someone comes back."

Violet hesitated, flexing her talons, seething, and then quickly backed off with a threatening scowl. "*Fine*," she growled. "Let the little beast live. We're already dead after all, why do *we* care what happens to the Realms anyway? We're *absolutely not* the Defenders whose job it is to *protect* Dragnaple. What *could* I have been *thinking*?"

"All right, go keep watch," Clouddusk grunted, not missing her sarcasm. "I'll get the egg ready for transport."

"But, *Clouddusk*--" Cyclone began.

"You three can go with her," Clouddusk interrupted, not looking up as he began to weave some of the grassy bedding together protectively. "I can handle this." The others hesitated. "Go on," he encouraged when none of them budged. He gave them a reassuring smile that none of them returned. "*Really*. I've got this. Go make sure we weren't followed."

After sharing a nervous glance, the dragons turned and slowly made their way out of the cave, leaving Clouddusk alone with the egg. He set it softly against the wall and let out a sigh, watching the small figure wriggle inside. "What *are* you?" he whispered to it. "Your magic says you're different. The Realms say you're dangerous. My head tells me to fear you, but my heart...well, I'm not sure *what's* going on there right now."

Silence. He had expected nothing more.

He leaned forward to tenderly brush the egg once again. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, settling both his wings and his nerves. Instantly, the world morphed into a patchwork of color, grim and dark, yet, somehow allowing sunlight through the shrouded leafy canopy. The *future,* Clouddusk realized, as hasty paw steps drew his eyes to his right. Or...at least, what the future *could* be.

A flash of blue.

Clouddusk's head shot up as a young dragon exploded from the thick foliage, laughing and wheeling to throw a grin over his shoulder. Moments later, four more hatchlings piled from the bushes behind him. They were smiling, the best of friends, allies, *teammates.* They trusted him. They *loved* him.

*Is this the fate these five?* Clouddusk wondered, sifting even further into the illusion. *Who are they? Why...why do they seem...so familiar?*

Suddenly, the world shifted, and everything dissolved to black. The same hatchlings reappeared, only, this time, oozing crimson splattered the bright meadow. The blue dragon snarled threateningly, lunging for the smallest dragon, bowling him against the earth and slicing his throat effortlessly. The others fled, *terrified*,

only to be caught and struck down one by one.

The scene changed once more. Clouddusk saw the five hatchlings standing side by side, facing down the darkness. The blue hatchling stood at their head, their strong and fearless leader, as they battled back against a shadowed evil and rose to the cheers and praises of their peers.

And then the vision was over and Clouddusk snapped back to reality, releasing his grip on the egg and staring down at it, dazed. "You have a *truly* complex future, little one," he mumbled. "Who *are* you?"

Talons clattered against the cavern floor and a gentle breath whispered into his ears.

"*Clouddusk*?" It was Violet. He didn't turn as she padded up to his side and stared down at the egg warily. "What *is* it?"

"Did you *see* it?" Clouddusk breathed, twisting to look up at her, baffled.

She returned his gaze hesitantly before answering. "Yes. *So,* what are we going to do about it?"

"'*We*?'" Clouddusk echoed.

"Yes, *we*," Violet sighed and coiled her tail into his. "It's always been 'we', Clouddusk. And," she shrugged. "I may not approve of trying to raise this...this *hatchling*," The words sounded painful in her throat, "but you're right. It's innocent. It doesn't deserve to die. No matter who...or *what*...it is."

Clouddusk smirked, interlacing his tail as well. "Is that the protective dragoness instinct talking?"

Violet rolled her eyes. "*Keep* on dreaming, Driech." She broke away from him and fluttered across the cavern.

Clouddusk chuckled, shaking his head at the purple dragoness, and stepped forward to scoop up the egg.

And *that* was when the shell cracked.

Violet paused, midstride, and turned back questioningly as Clouddusk froze in place. There was a second crack, like glass shattering, and a strange light poured through the rifts in the shell's surface. "*What--"* Violet began.

And then the egg *exploded*.

Both fell back, shielding their eyes from the loose shrapnel, neither daring to look at the remains of the broken egg until the soft *plunk, plunk, plunk* of rain trickled back into their ears, permitting their wits to return as they began to glance up cautiously.

The egg was entirely destroyed, reduced to nothing more than unrecognizable shards.

"Is it--" Violet started again, only to be interrupted by a small, shrill *yap*. The two stared, wide-eyed, as a small head emerged from the shattered remains—a very *dark* blue head. The hatchling, hearing her exclamation, twisted around, opening its mouth into a wide toothless smile, and blinked its large blue eyes.

A shiver ran up the two adults' spines.

With an indignant squawk at the mere concept of being ignored, the hatchling attempted a wobbly step, tripped over a piece of its shell, and landed flat on its face.

Violet opened her mouth, looking down at it pityingly. "Uh...Clouddusk? *Why* is it already trying to walk?"

Not to be deterred, the hatchling wobbled up on stubby legs and started toward them again, splaying his miniature wings out on either side of him like a balancing pole.

He reached Violet first and flopped lovingly against her fore talons, cooing. At first, Violet recoiled from the touch and she whimpered; but *then,* seeing the small, helpless newborn, her gaze softened slightly and she knelt down to run her snout along his spine, earning a happy squawk from the hatchling. "Well, I *suppose*...he *is* kind of cute." She gave her talon a shake and the hatchling went

tumbling across the cave floor with a squeak of excitement.

It swung around, *this* time scrambling toward Clouddusk. It reared up, placing its fore talons on the bigger drake's, smiling toothlessly in a way that instantly calmed the male in a way he did not understand.

Perhaps it was the smallest of tail wags that sealed his fate.

Clouddusk looked down at the dragonet compassionately, all thoughts of danger or disaster vanishing from existence. "Yes, I suppose he *is*. Violet, I *think* this is the opportunity we've been waiting for." He lifted the hatchling to the star-filled heaven, noticing the light pulsing through its wings. He gave it a small smile, knowing the creature he held in his talons could change *everything*. "Our very *first* bridge to peace between the Realms. Say hello to Cloud Star."

# Chapter 1*

*19 years later...*

Cloud Star *really* wasn't the kind of dragon that would be considered "hero-material".

*Hero-material* was a title given to dragons who were brave, strong, and fearless; dragons who weren't afraid to stand up for what was noble and true and just. Heroes *always* fought for what they knew was right. Heroes were the ones that everyone turned to when there was nowhere else to go.

*Hero material* did *not* hatch from their eggs without knowing who they were or where they'd come from. They were not dragons who were alone in the world. Heroes were *special*. Heroes were loved by *everyone*.

No one would *ever* see him as the kind of dragon who could be a hero. He *wasn't* normal. He wasn't *at all* heroic. He wasn't a fighter, he didn't take pleasure in confrontation with his peers, and most importantly, possibly the *greatest* reason he could never be a hero; he had blue scales. He *knew* what it meant to be one of the cursed. *Heroes* did not have blue scales. No hero would *ever* have blue scales.

The *last* time a so-called hero with cerulean scales emerged, hundreds of corpses were left in his wake. No, there was absolutely, *positively*, no way Cloud would ever be anyone's savior.

He'd heard the tales of Twisterheart; the last of the fated blue dragons. The Realms called his kind dangerous. They called him a *monster*. They were *afraid* of him, afraid of what he and his prophesized magical scales might do. They had hunted the last of the Blues to the ends of the galaxy, slaying them in the hopes of never seeing another of his kind so long as the Realms remained.

It had worked.

There hadn't been a blue dragon on Dragnaple in over five hundred years.

Until him.

So, if he was *supposed* to be this *great dragon warrior* with all kinds of *magic* and *special abilities,* why did he feel *less than* powerful?

Talons raked along his snout and he howled, lunging away from his attacker and shaking blood from his nostrils. He blinked furiously through hot stings of pain, squaring his shoulders and spreading his wings to steady himself. "*Whoa*!" he cried, teetering as trees pinned his appendages against his sides. Having no option to fly away from the confrontation, he sidestepped, swinging to edge of the narrow clearing and bracing himself to retaliate.

His adversary hissed, azure eyes blazing with fury and cold determination. He reared back, lashing his enormous tail through the nearest foliage and rounding on the blue drake once again. Powerful muscle bulged behind his forelimbs, matched only by the rippling strength relayed through the rest of the dark Monterrian's body.

Cloud yelped as the thick claws came whizzing toward his eyes and he instinctively kangarooed sideways into the grass, tripping over his wings and tumbling on his back. The next thing he knew, heavy pawsteps stomped down against the earth and a roar knelt the trees on both sides of his head.

"*Coward*!" Coal howled, charging headlong *yet* again and giving no time for Cloud to recover.

Cloud scrambled to right himself, whirling over and leaping onto his feet, narrowly dodging a blast of fire aimed at his face. *Okay, okay, think Cloud, think. You've faced him before! Get it together and fight back!* He snarled dangerously, flicking his ears and taunting the other dragon to *try* a low blow like that again.

Coal growled, sucking another sharp breath, but *this* time, Cloud was ready. The fire was already at his jaws before he had time to think, blistering painfully against his tongue. He almost yelped at

the rapid onset, but it *wasn't* going to be there for long, he reminded himself, and he knew how to control it. He unhinged his jaws, letting the flames burst free and sending them barreling—*right* toward thin air.

His foe was *gone*.

*Oh, no!* Tell *me he didn't just...* He realized his blunder immediately and he whirled around, slicing the dirt with his talons and twisting to redirect the flames toward the sky.

He hadn't been quick enough. Not even *close*.

"YAAAARGGGHHH!" he howled as a matching fireball came soaring from the heavens and struck him head-on. He sprang back, beating his wings vehemently and dropping to the earth to roll out the flames. *Stop, drop, roll!* his brain chanted as his body the actions. *Stop, drop, roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!*

Even as he tumbled through the dirt, he heard his enemy touch down and nearly *felt* the next attack before it came. His reaction was too late, however, and the tail smashed against his maw, sending him reeling back even *further* into the dirt. Lights and pain burst through his skull and he struggled to stand, wincing at the metallic liquid resulting from the impact. *Don't give up, don't give in,* he snapped at himself. *This fight isn't over just yet!*

"Had *enough* yet, boulder-brain?" came the challenging taunt from somewhere overhead.

In response, Cloud rolled over and spat blood into the dirt. That was all the answer Coal needed. With a shrill cry of warning, he sprang for Cloud's chest. The impact bowled them both across the earth. Cloud fought viciously, beating the opposing drake with his wings and biting down hard on his scales. But no matter what he did to loosen it, Coal's grip refused to let up and the two smashed into the foliage, recklessly tumbling right and left, neither able to get a better hold on the other.

They slammed into a tree and the jar of the impact loosened the black hatchling's grip just enough for Cloud to forcibly yank the

talons from his throat and heave the mass of scales off of him. Then, before Coal could react, he lashed out with a powerful kick to his exposed underbelly. The drake heaved at the blow, reeling back, eyes bulging. He fell back, gasping for breath, curling his wings around his instantly shrinking form, glowering out from behind the safety of the tented appendages.

Cloud jumped to his feet, ready to turn the tables back on his rival. He flexed his talons and shook away the throbbing lights, growling dangerously. To his annoyance, Coal didn't look worried. He looked...irritatingly untroubled. Well, he would *show* him that he *should* be worried! With a determined yell, Cloud threw the full force of his body at the drake, already imagining pinning him to the earth and the triumphant blossoming feeling of victory that would follow.

The drake wasn't going to make it so easy for him, however. The moment Cloud's talons left the earth, he was already moving, disappearing from the blue drake's line of sight. Startled, Cloud tried to twist his body to follow and angled his wings to swoop back in the direction he'd come, but it was already too late. Coal, having predicted this action, slammed into him from behind. Cloud yelped as they collided and went tumbling through the air, blue and black blurring as they grappled, the claws hooking firmly into his scales and propelling them both into the foliage.

*He's stronger than me*, Cloud realized as his head nearly collided with a cluster of fallen branches. *I'm never going to be able to overpower him!*

The drake's eyes blazed as he sunk his talons into the joints of Cloud's wings, jerking him back and slamming him into the dirt once more. Hacking and wincing from the explosive fiery pain in his shoulders, Cloud sluggishly attempted to roll over. Two heavy talons slammed down on either side of his head, and he froze, looking up into the open menacing jaws of the dragonet. From there, he could see the faint glow of fire in the back of the hatchling's throat. *That's it*, he thought, panic-stricken. *I'm done for*. He smelled the smoke emitting from Coal's mouth and he covered his head with his wings, preparing for the end--

"*Enough*!"

A livid bellow split the darkness. Immediately, Cloud snapped his head around, scanning for the owner of the voice from the surrounding trees. At the same time, the hatchling towering above him released his pinned captive and scrambled to attention in a manner that reminded Cloud greatly of a startled fawn.

A monstrous dragon, larger than an elephant with scales the color of ashen soot, emerged from the shadows. Even *before* he saw the fierce glint of the green orbs, Cloud recognized this new arrival and as the realization of failure crashed over him, he suddenly wished he *had* been blasted by the dragonet's fire instead.

"You're dead," Clouddusk growled, peering down at Cloud as the blue dragon attempted to unearth himself and feign innocence. He *hadn't* been about to be murdered by a mountain dragon half a foot shorter than him. He *couldn't* have. He *hadn't* failed. Not *again*.

*"Again."*

Cloud moaned, heaving himself to his feet and straightening to stand alongside the black hatchling. "I could have won if Coal hadn't *cheated!"* he protested, refusing to meet the older dragon's gaze or the smug muzzle of the other drake. "He wasn't *supposed* to use his fire! You said we weren't supposed to *use* fire today!" Never mind the fact that he had done the *exact* same thing. He'd been provoked. Coal broke the rules first.

Clouddusk scoffed and swung his attention to the second drake. "*Night*," he growled, "*what* is the first rule of being a warrior?"

"Warriors never run from battle," Coal recited promptly, stretching his neck and rolling his shoulders complacently. "And they do whatever it takes to survive."

Clouddusk twisted back to Cloud. "Correct. Star, you're a smart dragon, but you *don't* have the best fighting instinct. Coal knows that and he used it to his advantage."

"The second rule of fighting; know your opponent better than you

know yourself. Not to mention you let your guard down to do that space-y thing where you look incredibly thoughtful at the most inopportune moment," Coal added with a cheeky grin, bumping Cloud's wings with his own. "From there, you didn't stand much of a chance either way. Your heart wasn't in it and even a *blind* hatchling could tell you that."

Although he knew Coal was probably right, Cloud couldn't help but glare at his fellow pupil. *So, what if I'm not a fighter*? he wanted to scream. *Not everyone can be as perfect as you, Coal!* Sometimes he really wished he had some of that supposed 'blue dragon power'. Then he could have shown Coal *just* how much of a chance he stood. Even just the ability to read minds. But no, he was just...*ordinary*. An ordinary dragon with ordinary powers.

And *apparently* under-average sparring abilities as well.

"Maybe if I just had time to think..." he started to suggest, his voice faltering at Clouddusk's disappointed headshake.

"In a real-life situation, you're not going to have *time* to plan your next attack. You *need* to act on instinct alone and *that's* why we're doing this. The two of you must learn how to fight like *real* warriors or you'll never be safe from the dangers the realms will present you with."

*The dangers that the realms will present you with because you are cursed and blue and powerless and the universe's worst warrior.*

And yet, this was how training in the Dream Realm typically went. He and Coal would spar, Coal would find some ingenious way to overpower him, Cloud would end up on his back; half of the time with blood gushing from some random portion of his body, and then Clouddusk would go on to lecture every tiny detail he'd done incorrectly and why he'd *never* be ready to leave and go out into the real world.

*Because Dragnaple isn't ready for blue dragons. They're still terrified of Twisterheart and all of his descendants.*

Clouddusk had told him the stories once, when he had been much

younger, about how the ancient dragon had come so close to destroying the universe. Cloud understood why the eight tribes would be so afraid. Twisterheart had been evil, there had never been question about that. But Cloud knew he wasn't anything like that. He didn't desire to rule the realms and he didn't murder dragons in cold blood because they stood in the way of his ascent to power.

As Coal had so eloquently pointed out, Cloud didn't have a dangerous bone in his entire body.

*I can be different!* He had vowed long before. *One day, I'm going to go out there. I'm going to meet the other tribes and then I will show the realms that Blues aren't a threat to anyone!*

After all, Clouddusk had saved him as an egg. *Surely* that meant the Defender believed he was different, right? That he could make a difference? That he wouldn't snap and murder everyone the first chance he had? Why *else* would Dragnaple's mightiest hero spare his life instead of following tradition?

"Although some battles can be won without violence, can't they? A real warrior must *also* know how to pick and choose his battles." Coal questioned, his gaze wide and challenging.

The gray dragon made a face. "Night, the day a war is averted by *words* is the day I resign as your guardian and eat my own tail." He curled his wings, frowning at the two reluctant hatchlings, "but *until* that day comes, the two of you need to practice. You must become a lot more coordinated with your skills *and* each other. You will have to look out for one another, otherwise *neither* of you will survive a day out there in the Realms. Do I make myself clear?"

"As crystal," Coal sighed.

"Good," Clouddusk swept his tail closer and eyed the two drakes carefully. "Go back to reality and tend to your duties. It will be morning soon. We will pick up where we left off tomorrow night."

"Oh, *but*--" Cloud wanted to ask what he'd done wrong and *more* importantly, how he could fix it, but the older dragon was already

circling to lumber back into the forest, no doubt to disappear off to whatever dank dark corner dead dragons tended spent their days. Cloud started to follow and then hesitated. If Clouddusk said the class was over, he *meant* it and Cloud should respect that. Besides, he could always ask again later when everyone was in a better mood.

Coal didn't have the same idea. "What about us?" he demanded, stepping forward to stop their mentor.

Clouddusk paused to glance back at him. "What *about* you?"

"You *said* we aren't ready to go out and see the world yet," Coal went on, his tone growing braver by the moment, "but how do you really *know* that?" Clouddusk raised an eyecrest but the hatchling rushed on before the gray dragon could interrupt. "I mean, no offense but you've been...*away*...from the Realms for a...*long* time now. What if the tribes have changed? What if they *love* him?" He jerked his head toward Cloud who involuntarily clenched his talons around the nearest clump of grass.

What if Coal was right? What if the Realms *had* changed? Could he live in a city like other normal dragons, live an ordinary life like other dragons? Could he *be* one of them after all?

*No*, the reasonable portion of his brain reprimanded. *If it were safe for me, Clouddusk would have let us go years ago. The only reason we're still here is because he doesn't think it's wise to let the world know I exist. Not yet anyway.* He glanced sideways at his best friend. *And that means Coal can't go because of me.* Guilt gnawed at his insides. It was *his* fault Coal wasn't allowed to go see the rest of the universe. Well, his *and* Clouddusk's. Coal had been a chance, a gamble that Clouddusk had not appreciated when Cloud, as a hatchling, had accidentally stumbled upon the abandoned newborn while exploring the forest near the foot of the mountains. At first, Clouddusk had refused to take in a second hatchling, claiming that one drake was already too much for him to handle, but Cloud had dragged Coal along and it had quickly become clear that he wouldn't do anything if it meant going without his newfound friend.

They'd been the best of friends for almost nineteen years and that

friendship had never wavered, thicker than thieves, brothers, even though not by blood.

But it was *Cloud* and keeping the truth hidden that prevented Coal from doing the one thing the mountain hatchling had always dreamed of: exploring the galaxy. And there was no greater sense of guilt than Cloud being forced to watch as each and every one of his brother's dreams were crushed and shattered into a billion tiny pieces.

"You're not *ready*," Clouddusk countered, "*either* of you. The galaxy is not a friendly place to...*differences*. Do you really think they'll accept him?"

*But I'm not dangerous!* Cloud thought rebelliously. Really, *I'm not!*

Coal's face fell. "Cloud couldn't even kill a *gnat* without giving it a proper funeral!" he argued. "Do you really think *anyone* is going to be terrified out of their wits by *that*?"

"They don't care," Clouddusk sighed as though the conversation was painful. "We've *talked* about this. They'll take one look at Star's scales and immediately associate him with his ancestor. To them, the outward appearance is everything. It doesn't *matter* what's on the inside."

*In this world, different is sometimes dangerous.* Cloud had learned that from an early age, but that didn't help to ease any sting from his mentor's words, even if he *knew* they were true.

"I disagree!" Coal went on, stamping a foot with a huff. "And we can prove it! Why don't you let us try? What's the closest village on Snowfalle? Flairforge? Let us go. We're supposed to watch over it anyway, right? Let us *prove* that dragons aren't the same now as they were a thousand years ago!"

Clouddusk paused and Cloud's heart leaped. *Is that a maybe? Did Coal really get through? Is Clouddusk actually considering--*

"No."

Coal's eyes widened and Cloud could see the specks of tears

brimming. "*But*-"

"Your time will come," Clouddusk cut him off abruptly. "You just need to learn to be patient. Now please*, go home.* I have *other* tasks that need my attention, greater than making sure your heads remain securely fastened to your shoulders." He opened his wings, preparing to take off into the endless heavens.

"But what if we-"

"*No*, Night. *You're not ready*. *Neither* of you are. End of discussion."

And with that, he was gone. Cloud squinted, watching until the drake was nothing more than a speck on the horizon, and then slowly let out his breath, swallowing back the lump of disappointment forming in his throat.

"'*As I said, your time will come*,'" Coal groused, unfurling his wings and throwing himself into the grass with a *thump*. "*Who* does he think he's kidding?" He kicked a rock away irritably. "Let's just face it, Cloud. In his eyes, we aren't good enough to be heroes. *That's* why he treats us like this. Locked away. *Hidden*. It's not for *our* protection. It's for *his peace of mind*!" He heaved a billow of unhappy smoke.

Though Cloud understood what his friend was saying, he couldn't make himself get angry at Clouddusk. *Sure,* he could be tough sometimes. Okay, realistically, *most* of the time. But surely that was just because he loved them, right? They weren't *that* much of a danger. Well, at least *Coal* wasn't. The black hatchling could pass as an ordinary Monterrian dragonet, despite having been raised away from typical civilization. Cloud, on the other talon, was the opposite. He knew why *he* was hidden away. The *last* thing he wanted was to cause mass panic. He was perfectly content stepping back and letting Clouddusk take charge.

*Obviously*, Coal didn't feel the same. "Cloud? Did you hear me?" he asked anxiously, waving a claw in front of the drake's snout.

Cloud snapped his gaze around, realizing he'd zoned out. He shot one final glance toward the firmaments to make sure Clouddusk

was actually gone before he gave his friend his full attention. "*What* is it, Coal?"

"What do you think?"

Cloud frowned, settling down next to him and drawing his wings and tail close. "Think about *what*?"

Coal smacked his forehead. "Were you not *listening*?" he groaned. Then, not waiting for an answer, he went on hurriedly. "What if we find a way to *prove* ourselves to Clouddusk?" Cloud said nothing, so he continued. "What if we did something...*special*...to show that we really do have what it takes?"

Cloud sighed. He could *already* tell this was going to end badly. "What do you have in mind?"

"A visit to Flairforge," Coal decided. "You and me *both*. Who knows? Maybe someone will require two heroic warriors." He heaved himself back up and spread his wings majestically.

"Er...Coal?" Cloud muttered, struggling not to roll his eyes at yet *another* far-fetched, doomed-to-failure scheme typical of his brother. "Do you think that's necessary? I mean, doesn't this all seem like a bit *much*?"

"'A bit much'?" Coal echoed, his voice laced with disbelief. "What do you mean? We could have a chance to be real heroes, Cloud. *Heroes*. Just like we've always dreamed. Isn't that what you *want*? A chance to show Dragnaple that scale color doesn't make a difference? This is *it*, Cloud. It's time. Let's show 'em the truth! Come on, pal, let's be heroes!"

Cloud opened his mouth to respond, to let his friend know just what a *crazy* idea it was and how he wanted *absolutely no part* in any suicide missions, but the look on the drake's face stopped him. Coal *really* wanted to do this. Coal *believed* what he was saying, and he was going to go one way or another, with or without Cloud, and the blue dragon couldn't let his brother go alone.

"All right, *fine,"* he growled, sliding his tail through the dead leaves

to wrap around his talons. No matter how much he disliked the idea, Coal made a fair point. It would *definitely* get Clouddusk's attention, though whether or not that was a good thing, he wasn't sure. Nevertheless, he couldn't see a way around it. Coal would go one way or another, with or *without* him.

And what kind of brother would he be if he let the Monterrian walk into a den of vipers alone?

He groaned, knowing his fate was sealed.

"*Fine.* I'm in."

# Chapter 2*

Coal's bellowing chatter reverberated above the eerie stillness of the caves, ringing off the walls and rebounding to the poor sleepless bats hiding away from the ruckus. "What do you think Clouddusk is going to do when he realizes that we were heroes all along? Do you think he'll let us protect a whole city? Oh, oh, *oh*! Do you think we'll get powers like *real* superheroes? What do you think *my* power will be?"

Cloud, who was lying on a stone ledge nearby, consoling his dreadful misfortune over a half-read scroll, glanced up tetchily at the discordance the younger hatchling presented. "You can talk the villains to death."

Coal ignored his cynicism. "I'll bet I'll be able move through the shadows like a ghost! *That's* it! I'll be the shadow warrior! Bad guys beware! And then you can be the sky hero, the best partner ever! The *dashing* and graceful blue dragon who swoops in at the last second, saves the day, *and* gets the girl!"

Cloud wished he could do a *little* less saving and more stuffing cotton into his ears. *If you spent as much time saving villagers as you did talking, we wouldn't ever be in danger at all*. "How *very* heroic of me."

Coal paused his yammering long enough to glance down crossly at the blue hatchling. "Your enthusiasm is *so* noted, Cloud," he said mordantly. "I thought you were my best friend. You're supposed to be *supportive*! Could you at least *pretend* to be excited about what I am telling you?"

Cloud raised his eyes from the scroll, spotting the midnight-scaled dragonet fluttering overhead, weaving amongst a cluster of stalactites. Honestly, he was surprised they didn't come crashing down on his head and put him out of his misery. The amount of preposterous proclamations the hatchling was making was *way* too much to bear, *especially* when they came before breakfast. *"Really,*

Coal, it's not that big of a deal," he muttered, flipping the manuscript over to read the final few paragraphs. "Sure, being a hero sounds all peachy and sunshiny, doesn't it? But you heard what Clouddusk said, right? Dragons have *died* trying to be those guys. Do you want the same thing to happen to *us*?"

*To you?*

*The opportunity to be a real hero; that is* all *I want, but not at the risk of Coal's life. He won't do these stupid stunts and be so attention-seeking if he gets his chance. But he can't do that with me around holding him back and I'm not going to be the one to sell his soul to this mission.*

Coal came to a screeching halt, frowning down at his cavemate. *"Wow*. When did you become such a grouch? Only hours ago, you sounded like it would be a dream come true if you got the opportunity. What happened to the Cloud I know? Can I speak to him now, Mister Killjoy?"

"I don't know," Cloud grumbled, pointedly looking away and sinking back into the realm of scrolls and knowledge. "But I *do* know Clouddusk won't like us going to Flairforge. You've seen how he is about that kind of thing."

"Yeah," Coal sighed, dropping into the cave floor below him. "I do, and honestly, he's an even *bigger* curmudgeon than you are. But I *also* know what he would say if we *didn't* go and we could've saved someone from some unforeseen disaster."

*Curmudgeon? Is that your new word of the week or something? Oh, forget it. I don't know why I bother trying to reason when he's like this*. Cloud growled, dropping his scroll in a huff, knowing he wasn't going to get anywhere with his studies while Coal was running his tangent. "You're too excited about this," he admonished. *Plus, Flairforge isn't in danger. It's just a sleepy little town in the middle of nowhere where nothing exciting ever happens.*

*"No*, *you're* just not excited *enough*." Coal opened his wings and beat them, peeved. With a short bound, he landed in front of a scroll shelf and began digging through the assortment of documents as well. "This is an *adventure*, Cloud! We can be just like the Winged

Five! Everybody will love us and no one will *ever* have to fear your scales again!"

"That would be awesome," Cloud admitted, "if it could *happen*. But it's a fairy tale, Coal. A *dream*, that's all. It could never happen, no matter how much we try. It's just," He clenched his talons into fists, crushing the scroll inside, "not possible." He stood up, stretching tiredly. He glanced down at the paper clinging to his claws and then shook it off resignedly.

"How do you *know* that?" Coal demanded.

"*Coal*," Cloud said irritably, pointing to the dozens of scrolls the hatchling was currently tossing into a discard pile. "Have you *read* any of these texts? Do you not see what they call me? To them, I'm a *monster*. A freak *and* a psycho *and* a murderer. I'm *not* what they are looking for in a savior. I'm not a hero."

"Then prove them wrong!" Coal retorted sharply, chucking another parchment at his snout. "You've been saying you wanted to be something different for *years*! *Be* the good guy, Cloud! *Prove* that your scale color doesn't matter!"

"And *how* exactly do you propose I do that?" Cloud demanded. "It's not like I can just stroll into the square, flash them a charming smile, and expect to keep my head attached to my shoulders." *They wouldn't give me the chance. Coal, maybe, but me? My face would be incinerated before I reached 'hello', never mind the five billion dad jokes I have in reserve.*

"Well then," Coal said, tossing the last bundle of scrolls to the side and stretching his wings boredly. "I guess we'll just have to get you a disguise!"

"You're going to get *me* a disguise?" Cloud scoffed. "And how, may I ask, do you plan to do that? Paint my scales? Cover my wings with clay? What about a cape? *Very* fashionable for superheroes, I've heard."

"No, and that just sounds stupid. I'm being serious." Coal frowned. "There are cloaks that travelers can purchase in town. I could get

you one of those. They'd hide you...decently. Maybe a hood to match? No capes required."

*Oh yeah, I'm sure* that *would be inconspicuous.* Cloud sighed and pushed the tattered scroll away. "Are you really suggesting the possibility of me coming with you?"

Coal nodded. "I am." Seeing Cloud's disbelieving gaze, he quickly continued. "*Look,* Cloud, it's time for you to get out of that Clouddusk-obedient shell. The world is not like it was with Twisterheart. Clouddusk doesn't understand that, but *we* do. It's ready for a hero now. It's ready for *you.*"

"No," Cloud mumbled, burying his head beneath his wings, wishing he had the power to disappear. "No, it's *not.* I...I can't do that, Coal. It's too risky. What if they are still afraid of me? What if they hurt *you* because you're with me?" *What if it was all my fault?*

"*What if* I clobber you for being an overprotective worrywart?" Coal retorted, throwing his talons up in exasperation. "What *happened* to you? I thought all you dreamed of was being a hero!"

"I'm not a hero," Cloud growled, voice still muffled by his wings. "I will *never* be a hero."

"And *why not*?" Coal challenged. "Because your scales are blue? Where is it written that all blue dragons are notorious killers? *I* don't see that in any scroll. You don't have to be like that, Cloud. You have the chance to be different than your ancestors. So why don't you make something out of it?"

"Well, *because--"*

"'Because' nothing," Coal interjected. "You're a *good* dragon. I'm not the only one who can see that. But do you know why they're so afraid of you?" When Cloud gave no answer, Coal continued. "It's because you never let them see who you really are. You've never *tried* to be a good guy. You've spent your entire life up here in this cave of solitude. You *have* to get out there, make them see who you truly are. And that's going to start today. *Get up*."

Cloud uncovered his head and blinked. "*Why*?"

"Because it's time you stopped moping around feeling sorry for yourself," Coal responded. "Now stand up before I have to bite you."

Deciding to believe that threat, Cloud obeyed with reluctance. He swished his tail across the leafy floor and gave his wings a shake before folding them back up against his sides. "So," he said slowly. "Your plan is *what* exactly? You're going to get me some kind of cloak that's supposed to protect me from the pointy swords they want to stab into my soul? Is it somehow enchanted with the secret magical abilities that you haven't told me about?" The sarcasm was literally dripping from his words and Coal didn't miss it, flashing the older drake an irritated glance.

"Humorous, Cloud," Coal grumbled, rolling his eyes as he spun and walked out of the cavern. *"Really* humorous."

"Thought you'd approve," Cloud retorted, hurrying down the passageway after him. The corridor darkened tremendously as they traveled away from the main hall and down the dimly lit passage. To his left and right, he could hear the steady trickling of rain pouring in from the outside forest. The gurgling of a small waterfall told him that they were trekking deeper the underground caverns and he sensed the dropping temperature rushing across his scales.

"We need to go to that village," Coal said as they rounded a bend and emerged in a smaller cavern with a steaming hot spring. Lights danced off the walls around them as Coal lumbered toward the far corner where multiple additional scroll racks had been placed, stacked to the brim with jotted notes and pieces of charcoal. "Not just for the sake of the world, but for yours as well. The universe is changing. Maybe it's time we help it along a bit."

"I still don't think this is a great idea," Cloud warned as he sifted through the shelves of scrolls, searching for a specific one from the racks. Finding it, he carefully slid it out and settled down to read in the opposite corner, near where they had come in and as *far* away from Coal as he could get.

"What *more* convincing do you need?" Coal questioned.

"How about a well detailed and thought-out *plan*?" Cloud suggested, unrolling the scroll and attempting to read again. "Part of being a hero is not charging into anything blindly. Figure out *exactly* how we are going to pull this off and then *maybe* I'll consider it."

"That takes all the fun out of it!" Coal protested.

Cloud scowled at him.

"Okay, *okay*, I'll think about it." The dusky dragon retreated from the glare and instead focused his eyes on the scrolls as well.

"Good," Cloud responded. "While you do that, I'll go through some of these old files on the Winged Five."

"'Old files'?" Coal echoed, dropping what he was doing and wandering over curiously. "*What* files? There aren't any documents of the Winged Five. They weren't supposed to *exist*."

"Yes, there are," Cloud retorted, holding up the scroll.

"That's *are hatchling's* tales," the black drake groaned, rolling his eyes. "They aren't *real, Cloud."*

"But what if they *are*?" Cloud countered. "Legends are usually based off of at least a little bit of truth, aren't they? According to these scrolls, Clouddusk was once a Defender himself. And if *he* was real..." Letting his voice trail off, he ran a talon across the paper pointedly.

"*Right*," Coal snorted. "And I suppose you believe that they *actually* got their powers from touching random enchanted *stone*s then *too*?"

"I don't know," Cloud confessed. "We weren't around to see it for ourselves, *obviously*. I don't know how much of it is accurate. But I *do* believe Clouddusk was a hero. I *know* he was the leader of the Winged Five and I think he knows *more* than he's letting on."

"Okay, *fine,* I'll bite. If the stories *are* true, then where is Darkwhisperer?"

"*Who*?

"Darkwhisperer. You know, the drake who was originally the leader of the Winged Five. Although I suppose most know him as Dark Night now."

"Dark Night? You mean the treacherous supervillain who was once the Defender of Dreams, who betrayed his team, and tried to blow up the entire universe? *That* Dark Night?"

"That's the one."

Cloud shuddered. "Some parts of the stories *have* been exaggerated," he amended. "There's no way to tell for sure which parts are true and which aren't. Dark Night could just be a figment of someone's imagination, you know? A made-up enemy for the Winged Five to defeat, to make sure hatchlings listen to their parents."

*Oh, yes, good backtrack there, Star, an excellent and flawless u-turn.*

"But what if he *wasn't*?" Coal questioned, grinning boldly. "What if he was *real*?"

*I thought you just said you didn't believe the stories,* Cloud thought dryly. "If he *was* real," he said, his voice dropping several decibels, "and that's a big '*if*', why have we never seen him lurking around the Dream Realm whenever we're training? If he had been real at some point, wouldn't he have been there somewhere?"

"I don't know," Coal answered, "but I doubt he'd want to hang out *anywhere* near the dragons that locked him away in eternal nothingness."

"Allegedly, but that still doesn't mean anything!" Cloud argued, painfully aware of how quickly the argument was turning against him. "Clouddusk is real! So, doesn't it make sense to assume that the others might be as well and that of these," He flung a claw at the pile of scrolls, "may not be all made up?"

Coal sighed and flexed his talons like he did whenever he *knew* he was losing. "All right, fair enough. But I'm *trying* to tell you, even if this place *could* be real, how could all of these dragons possibly have existed? Their powers, their abilities, where did they come

from? *Stones*? *Think* about it, Cloud. Use your head. How does that make *any* sense?"

"Sometimes things don't *have* to make sense. Sometimes, Coal, you just have to have a little faith."

*"Faith*?" Coal snorted. "In a bunch of *fairy tales*?"

"Not in fairy tales," Cloud said. "In *Clouddusk*. You have to trust that he knows what he is talking about. He won't lead us astray."

Coal wrinkled his snout. "We aren't talking about the scroll anymore, are we?"

"You know what I mean." Cloud curled in his tail and breathed a hot plume of smoke.

"I'm *going* to Flairforge," Coal repeated stubbornly. "You can't stop me so you might as well save your breath."

"I *know* I can't," Cloud said, "but that's not going to stop me from trying."

Coal rolled his eyes.

"You think this is the best way to get Clouddusk's attention?" Cloud went on. "*Sure,* rebellion might earn you what you want, but is it really *worth* it?"

"*Absolutely*. Now come on, we've got a disguise to work on." With that, Coal reset the shelves and bounded toward the exit. With a resonated sigh, Cloud stood to follow, stretching his wings tiredly behind him and preparing himself for the outside world.

The air was crisp and cool and the grass was littered with dew as the two drakes emerged from their hideout and started through the nearest ravine. Cloud plodded softly behind Coal, his ears twitching as he took in the chittering birds, humming bees, babbling brook. It was *quieter* here than the Dream Realm, and so much more peaceful. Often times, the lines between reality and fantasy blurred and became almost indistinguishable. Thankfully, this was not one of them and Cloud found himself enjoying the serenity of Snowfalle

more than he typically did.

*After how last night went, I really needed this.*

They exited the far side of the ravine and Coal led the way up a grassy hill. Here the trees thinned and narrowed, unfurling to a lush drop gulley overlooking a deep valley, and creating space for the two young dragons to stand side by side. The sun was just beginning its trek across the heavens, casting a pinkish-orange hue across the city below. From where Cloud stood, he could see the first multicolored specs that were the villagers mulling through the streets and the first of the vendors setting up shop for the day.

*Dragons from all seven tribes—all of the Realms—living side by side.*

*Together. In peace.*

Once more, the longing to join them washed over him and he drew in a sharp breath, taking it all in.

Coal, noticing this, glanced his way and wrapped a wing around the drake's shoulders comfortingly. "It's time," he said, smiling and putting on a brave face and making sure Cloud saw every single glinting fang. "Let's go say hello to Dragnaple."

# Chapter 3*

"Just for the record," Cloud hissed, "I *still* think this is a terrible idea."

"*For the record*," Coal shot back, "that's the seventh time you've told me in the past fifteen minutes. For Clouddusk's sake, could you just *relax?* Look, the disguise is perfect. No one's paying attention to us." He pointed to the numerous townsfolk meandering the streets, weaving around them without so much as an anxious glance in their direction.

*They really aren't bothered by the presence of the two newcomers at all,* Cloud reluctantly admitted. *It's like it's an everyday occurrence here or something.* "I'm *just saying*," he muttered, tugging the hood lower over his eyes, double-checking that his snout wasn't visible through all the layers. "I don't think we should have come here. Father was right. Something about this place just feels...off."

"You still call him father?" Coal scoffed. Cloud glowered at him. "Okay, that was mean. I'm sorry. I'm just saying that you're worrying too much. Come on, enjoy yourself a little. This is our chance to prove to Clouddusk that we have what it takes to be heroes. We can't mess it up because you feel all mopey and guilty every step of the way."

*Don't you think there's a reason I'm like this?*

"*Great* pep talk," Cloud sighed, as they shuffled down the main street into town. He felt the buildings closing in on them and laughter could be heard from the balconies two stories above their heads. Cloud kept his head down, praying they wouldn't notice him. "So, what's the plan?" he added under his breath as they shouldered their way through the crowd. He identified dragons of all seven breeds here, gathering and gossiping as though they'd been friends their whole lives. In the square, a group of hatchlings; two water-dwellers, a raynbow dragoness, and a desert dragoness, tailed one other around in a frantic attempt at chase. *They don't care that their*

*worlds are at odds. They weren't raised to fear and despise one another. They have what the rest of the galaxy needs—a general understanding of compassion and friendship.*

Just like Coal and him. His best friend was Monterrian—a world vastly different from the Raynbow blood he knew coursed through his veins. Monterrians were a naturally larger and stronger tribe, thriving off the rocky, dangerous mountainous terrain as opposed to the slender form that the creator had given Cloud—opportune for the grassy, plain-like terrain of Raynbowfalls. Their friendship had been an entire coincidence (*fate*, Coal called it, but Cloud didn't believe in that).

"It's really simple! We scope the place out, find someone who needs help, help them, and prove ourselves to Clouddusk. *Super* easy!"

Cloud barked a wry laugh. "Nothing about this is easy, Coal. *Nothing."*

"Oh, *enough* grumbling!" Coal exclaimed. "No one's even *looking* at us!"

"How do you *know* that?" Cloud demanded, swallowing hard and picking up the pace to match the drake.

"Do you remember when Clouddusk gave us training in tracking?" Coal questioned, lifting his head and swiveling his large bat-like ears. "If we were being watched, we would have noticed, right? *For example*, there are currently three dragons standing on their porch steps. By the looks of them, two are under the age of five and the other is an elderly shopkeeper peeling potatoes. *See*? You're just overreacting."

Okay, Coal was right. Cloud could hear the two hatchlings' laughter and the whistling of the shopkeeper, but that didn't even remotely ease the stabs of anxiety. "All right, *fine,* so maybe I'm a bit nervous," he fretted, "but I think I *have* that right. Besides, I'm worried about my disguise. What happens when someone realizes that I'm not what I look like?" *And that what is underneath is a thousand times worse?*

"What you *look* like is a walking nine-foot mud puddle, pal. I don't think *that's* going to be very subtle by anyone's standards. Besides, if the locals were going to get nosy, I think they'd have already done so, don't you?"

"If you say so," Cloud muttered.

"I *do*," Coal said, nudging him reassuringly. "Lighten up! This is an adventure! You're supposed to be having fun! Now, *come on!* I want to check out the fountain! Maybe there are actual fish in there! Or a *turtle.* I've always wanted to see a turtle." He picked up his pace and began trotting toward the center of town.

Cloud exhaled loudly and drew his wings in further beneath his cloak, hurrying to keep up. Even though what the black hatchling had said *was* true, he couldn't help the feeling that they were being watched. It felt like a laser beam burning through his shoulders but when he paused to glance back, there was no one there. *I don't like this place,* he decided. *It gives me the creeps. I wonder why Coal doesn't feel it too.*

A gaggle of hatchlings darted past him, bumping up against his legs and tail. They squealed with pleasure, nudging and tugging at his disguise. Cloud, panicking, tried to shake them off, sending a mountain hatchling rolling backward into the dirt. She blinked up at him with large dandelion eyes and then sneezed, tumbling head over wings and gaining an eruption of giggles from her friends.

*They're so carefree,* Cloud thought, giving them a weak smile. *They don't understand anything about the outside world.*

*They are friends.*

*They don't care that they are supposed to kill one another.*

A shrill summon from a nearby home sent the group scrambling, laughing and squealing the entire way. Cloud drew a careful, steady breath and honed his focus on Coal's steady black scales as the hatchling wove precariously in and out of the crowd, his attention drawn to something beyond his line of sight. He guessed it must be the fountain as the drake broke into a sprint, rounding a bend and

vanishing from view.

"Coal!" he protested, tugging his cloak closer and picking up his pace. "Slow down! *Wait for me!"*

But his friend had disappeared into the crowd, leaving Cloud alone in the bustling mob of dragons. Frantically, he stretched onto his tiptoes, scanning the mess of scales and wings for the familiar figure of the drake. Someone bumped roughly into his side and he yelped, swinging around. *Oh no, oh no, oh no*, his mind chanted as the startled dragoness hastily rushed on without so much as a second look. *Coal!* he yelped silently. *No! Wait! Don't leave me here! I don't want to be alone! I* can't *be! Come back!*

Dragon piled on dragon, making it almost impossible to distinguish one from another. Someone else passed him and nearly ripped his hood back with their wings. Fighting back the urge to whimper, he clung to his cloak and tried to stare solely at the ground, praying desperately that they would all just go away and not notice him, his heart throbbing uncontrollably in his chest. Something was wrong.

Something was *really* wrong.

His lungs tightened and his limbs froze, locking him in place and nearly sending him careening into the dirt. He couldn't breathe. *What is* happening *to me?*

"Coal!" he hissed weakly. "Coal, where are you? *Coal*!"

*Please...please come back. I don't know...what to do. I'm...I'm scared.*

Everything was closing in on him. The world danced across his vision and his knees felt weak. His throat constricted and his voice trickled away to desperate wheezes. Confused, he brought his talons to his chest, focusing on inhaling and exhaling evenly as his body screamed for air.

*He's gone. Coal's gone. He's left me here.*

*Alone.*

He was so focused on his rattled, circling train of thought that he

didn't hear the footsteps approaching from the darkness. Someone prodded him gently on the wings and, startled, he jumped, blinking furiously, failing to clear his blurry vision from the persistent river of tears. "Coal?" he gasped hopefully. He blinked again, but the scales that had materialized before him were certainly *not* black, nor were they Monterrian.

"Son," came a raspy voice from his left, *much* too old and deep to be his brother's. "You are not well. Come with me." Cloud's breath caught in his throat as a wing abruptly wrapped around his shoulders, guiding him away from the crushing hoard. "Come on. That's it. It's all right. You're going to be just fine."

They moved against the back of a towering building and his rescuer circled to him, his murky brown scales becoming visible for the first time against the dim rays of morning light. "Try deep breaths," the sea dweller instructed. "In and out. That's it. Good. Feel the earth under your talons and dig in deep. Let it center you. You are all right. You are *safe* here."

Cloud gulped, nodding as he fought to focus on drinking as much air as his lungs would allow, feeling himself come back down from the nausea high and the instant relief that came with it. "W-what wa-was--" he heaved, unsure where his words had flown or how to call them back.

The drake shook his head. "No, don't try to speak. Focus on your breathing. You are having an anxiety attack. You can ask questions later. It was a very *risky* thing you did coming here now. You're fortunate someone of...*poorer temperament*...did not recognize you sooner."

*He knows.* Lightning rocketed through Cloud's veins, forcing him to straighten his spine and back away defensively, his claws already retracting from his peaceful control, balling into fighting curves. "Who...*who*...are...y-you?"

"My name is not important," the dragon responded evasively. "I'm here to give you a warning."

*A warning?* Cloud was so confused. Was this dragon *not* going to kill

him? Why? He'd been caught red--well, *blue-taloned*. *The Realms don't like dragons like me,* his mind echoed Clouddusk's words in horrendous volumes. *I should be dead. I am* going *to be dead any second now.*

So why did the dragon look...almost *serene*?

"You need to leave this place *immediately*," the Watterlaek male went on, lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper, his eyes not quite meeting the drake's in a very I-know-something-you-could-only-dream-of shifty way. "You should never have come here, Chosen One. They *know* you're here now and they will do anything to stop the prophecy."

Cloud's eyes widened. "I'm sorry, *what?* Did you say 'prophecy'?" *Great stars, he said prophecy, didn't he?*

"There's no time to explain. Young Defender, if you value your life —or the lives of these civilians, you will go. *Now*. Leave before it's too late. Trust your Guardian. He *will* protect you."

*Prophecy? Guardian?* What on *Dragnaple* was *going on* and why in the *world* did he need protected? Clouddusk had raised him to defend himself--more or less. He wasn't just going to drop dead on command! But then he thought of how *quickly* this dragon had figured him out. What if others did as well, others who *weren't* as friendly? Others still believed him to be evil and vicious. They wouldn't warn him. They would kill him. Was *that* what the Monterrian was trying to tell him?

Or was there something more sinister lying beneath the drake's words than Cloud understood?

"*Beware*," the dragon hissed, glancing over his shoulder at the dark streets and back again. What was he looking for? "Beware the heir of thunder and night. Beware the coming fight. Beware the impending doom. Beware the war coming soon."

Cloud blinked. *Was that a prophecy? That* sounded *like a prophecy.* "I don't underst--"

An explosion rocked the streets and the earth underneath them rattled. Dragons screamed as the buildings crumbled and collapsed at the disturbance. Cloud let out a yelp, reacting immediately by jumping backward as part of the roofing overhead came crashing down. Instinct and years of study for a situation similar to this kicked in and Cloud lunged sideways to protect the elder, throwing his wings over the sea dragon's head to take the brunt of the impact himself.

A nearby window exploded outwards, shrapnel raining to the earth. Cloud yelped, tucking his head and squeezing his eyes shut as the glass shattered upon his neck and back. Internally, his brain was screaming for him to pick himself up and *run*. That whatever was happening, he didn't want any part of it. That was what the dragon had *told* him to do, wasn't it? To escape before it was too late?

It definitely *felt* too late now.

But at what cost? The Monterrian he was shielding? The hundreds of dragons who called this village home? What would happen to everyone if he fled? Clouddusk had implemented in him the sense of duty, loyalty, and responsibility. It was his *responsibility* to help these dragons. He couldn't just leave them behind, no matter what his crippling fear said otherwise.

*"Sir, are you okay*?" he yelled over the deafening shrieks of the citizens as another building lit up with flames and the fire promptly spread to nearest connecting structures. The earth underneath him gave a terrible shake and he narrowly dodged a slab of concrete collapsing across his snout.

There was no response from the older drake, though Cloud could still feel him underneath the safety of his tented wings. He was too afraid to move, too afraid to look and see if the sea dragon was okay. He could only stand there, eyes closed tightly, praying with everything he had that everything would be all right and the world would just *stop shaking*.

"Cloud? CLOUD, WHERE ARE YOU?"

Frantic pawsteps came barreling from the smoke. Forcing his eyes

open into narrow slits, Cloud was faintly able to make out the blurry outline of a familiar burly drake shouldering his way through the panicking crowd toward him, azure eyes alight with terror.

"Coal!" the blue drake yelled. "Over here!"

"*Cloud*!" the hatchling screamed again, managing to shove past the stampede and hastening to stand beside Cloud, wings unfurled protectively. "Are you *crazy*? What are you doing just *standing around*? There are a bunch of madmen blowing up the town! We need to get out of here, like *yesterday*!"

Cloud hesitated and finally glanced under his wings to check on the older dragon, afraid of the silence. Perhaps all of the excitement had been too much for the elderly drake. Cloud had to be sure before he agreed to anything further—before he ran away. "Sir, is this what you were trying to warn me abou—"

He stopped, jaw slacking to form the second half of his question.

There was *no one there.*

The dirt was untouched, and the dragon had *vanished.*

*What in the great stars?* "Where'd he *go*?" he gasped aloud, already scanning the area but seeing no sign of the hobbling elder.

"*Cloud!* Stop staring at the wall! Are you even *listening* to me?" Coal cried.

"I...I don't understand," Cloud murmured, backing off another step. "He was just...just *here*."

*What was going on?*

*Surely, I didn't just hallucinate all of that, did I?*

No, that wasn't possible. He didn't have dreams so vivid. The dragon *had* been there, he was sure of it.

"WHO?" Coal screeched. "*Who* are you talking about? Cloud, *there's no one there!* We need to leave! NOW!" As he spoke, a flaming plank

dropped from the sky between them, causing both to screech and leap back from the vengeful heat.

Cloud hesitated, seeing the flames reflected in Coal's terrified eyes as the black drake took another step away from the rubble. Cloud *had* to make a decision and he had to make it *fast*. He could hear the screaming of the civilians drumming inside his brain. He could *feel* their fear. He saw Coal already tensing, ready to flee and save himself.

And in that moment, Cloud *knew* what he had to do.

Without a word, he whirled and took off down the alley and back into the opposing street of stampeding and confused dragons, forcing back the bubbling fear of being knocked to the ground and crushed or of his cloak being ripped away at the seams. He *had* to do this. It was the *right* thing to do. He *knew* it was.

*"Cloud*? What are you *doing*? CLOUD!" He heard Coal scream behind him. A moment later, he heard strong wingbeats overhead and Coal dove down in front of him, cutting off his path with spread, shaking talons. "Are you *insane*? Why are you running *toward* the guys trying to kill us when we should be running *away*?"

"These dragons need our help!" Cloud shouted back, trying to lunge around his friend as another nearby building went up in flames, sending several dragons shrieking from the balcony and away into the night. "We *have* to help them!"

"But, Cloud! It's a *warzone* out here! We could get hurt! *I* could get hurt!"

"*You* said you wanted to be a hero!" Cloud fired back, stomping back, frustrated that there was no way past his brother. There was *no time* to debate this! Dragons were hurt. Dragons were *dying*. "Well, *this* is your chance!"

"I *meant* like helping some old dragoness across the street!" Coal protested, dismayed. "Not all of *this*!"

"*This* is what being a hero is all about!" Cloud argued furiously,

gesturing with a wing. "We can't just *stand* here and *watch* this happen! And we *certainly* can't just *run* away! Clouddusk *said* it was our job to protect this town! We weren't even supposed to come here but we did! So, now we *have* to protect it!"

Coal flinched at these words and his eyes dropped to the earth shamefully. Powers or no, it didn't take a mind reader to know the internal war that was erupting between the black drake's common sense and his desires. Cloud completely understood where he was coming from This was a *long* jump from helping elders cross the street to saving an *entire* village from terrorists. And there were only two of them, neither fully grown or *at all* prepared to take on any multitude of villains.

But, as Clouddusk had always said, sometimes being a hero meant rising up to a challenge, even if the time did not seem right in the moment; because destiny had this cruel way of selecting true heroes at their moments of vulnerability when they were so far from confident in their own abilities that it seemed there would be no way to come out alive.

Until now, Cloud had never believed a lick of his mentor's words to be true, but now it was almost impossible to excuse.

*This* was that moment; the moment of greatness.

And Cloud felt *anything* but ready.

There was a pause and for a moment, nothing was said. Then Coal took a deep breath, determination alight in his eyes once again as he wheeled to face the oncoming hoards and squared his shoulders. "Okay. I get it and you're right. We are their guardians. We need to help fight back too. *So,* what's the plan?"

Cloud grinned at him. "Who needs a plan?" With that, he turned and leaped into the air, high above the smoke and ruin in moments.

Coal watched him go with a scowl before tossing his head with an exasperated roll of his eyes and hastily following him. "I *really* regret saying that, you know."

His defensive instincts activated almost instinctively, and Cloud surveyed the village below. Beyond the far ridge, he spotted an army of dragons swarming the town like an infestation of hundreds upon hundreds of lumbering ants. *It's like something out of a nightmare*, he thought. No, it was *so* much worse. Each of the attackers was carrying a torch, promptly throwing them at the nearest homes or shops. And the houses, crudely constructed from mud and thatch, caught like wildfire, swelling the widespread panic even further.

Cloud knew this *had* to stop. *Now*, before anyone else got hurt. He had no idea why anyone would *want* to attack this town, but didn't matter now. There was *no* excuse for this kind of violence and so, angling his wings, he swept low over the approaching mob, sucking in a deep breath and letting out a long wave of flames. Dragons shrieked as they dove for cover, leaving the meadows to be singed by the brute force of the hatchling's attack, but as Cloud came back around for a second pass, he realized none of the dragons in the mob had been fazed by his attack. In fact, as they continued their march in oddly perfect sync, it seems as though they hadn't felt it *at all.*

*What on Dragnaple?* His logical mind screeched as he swept past Coal's hiding spot, locating the black hatchling fighting back on foot as four enemies came charging from the shadowed allies. *They didn't stop?* How *is that possible?*

Stop? They didn't even *flinch!*

*"Seize the Defender!"* a snarl rose from somewhere amongst the ranks. "*Stop him*!"

"Wait, *what*?" Cloud yelped. *"Huh*?" He whirled in the direction of the outburst, but before he could complete the turn, there was a rush of movement and three dragons had surrounded him. Well, Cloud *guessed* they were dragons, though they didn't look *anything* like any dragons he had ever seen. They were bigger than the average Mountain drake and bulkier than sea dwellers—*much* larger than he was. All were equipped with long, sharp talons—similar to a desert species—and their eyes glittered an off-shade of magenta.

These things were *not* alive.

"Cloud! *Heads up*!" Coal called from the rooftops as he struck down another opponent and whirled, spraying crimson from his fangs and leaping straight back into the fray.

There was a snap of flesh from the air behind him and Cloud whipped around just in time to see the dragon behind him unhinge his jaw and shoot boiling fire at his face. "*Yeeeeoowww*!" Cloud hollered, barrel-rolling out of the way, feeling the heat from the blast singe his tail. "*Wow,* that hurt*!* Coal, would you get up here and *help* me already?"

"I *am* helping!"

Cloud growled, flipping away from a tail aimed for his snout. As he completed his maneuver and threw out his wings, his cloak flew back, revealing his true appearance in glorious firelight. *Perfect, just like every nightmare these creatures have probably had night after night,* he mused dryly. But he had no time to be concerned. Besides, he was too far up for anyone to see him clearly anyway.

He flipped over, buffeting one of the dragons in the side with a powerful blow of his wings—a move he knew should have been *super* effective against an agile opponent.

His body went right *through* the drake.

"*What*?" he gasped, falling back and righting himself, his spine tingling with panicked unease.

Something was *very* wrong here.

The dragon—or whatever it was—sneered, baring his fangs. "Not so tough without a team here to save you, *are* we, little Defender?"

Cloud narrowed his eyes, drawing in his talons and eyeing the numerous creatures circling. "*What* did you call me? *Who exactly* do you think I am?"

The shadow only laughed. "That's it, little hatchling. Run away to Clouddusk. *He'll* protect you from the big bad world. He's your

*precious* Defender of the Sea after all. How *is* dear old dad recently? Had any *thrilling* events since that tree collapsed on his hatchling's egg? Or perhaps he never *told* you about that. You *do* seem too weak to handle it anyway."

Cloud felt anger and indignation bubble up inside his heart. This dragon was *mocking* Clouddusk and there was no way he was going to get away with it. "*What* are you *talking* about?"

"CLOUD!" Coal suddenly screamed, and Cloud ripped his eyes from the jeering form to the rooftop right below him where Coal had managed to take refuge from the battle. "LOOK!" He twisted around and pointed off into the distance where a huge rift was appearing in the clouds and the first streaks of gold streamed toward the earth. Morning had come at last, and as the light began to envelop the horizon, the elongated shadows thinned. Many of the attacking dragons hissed in agony, cringing away from the glow...almost *fearfully*.

*Wait, so they* do *have a weakness?*

Instantly, the dragons surrounding Cloud fell back, eyes glinting furiously. "It's morning!" one whispered to the others. "Dawn is here! *Retreat*!" He raised his voice to a screech loud enough for the entire town to hear. "RETREAT!" There was a tremendous clamor of claws and wings and Cloud hissed as a wave of black creatures rose from the streets and alleys, leaving the village below to burn in their wake.

Cloud stared, watching the dragons' retreating wing-strokes, still very dazed. He shook his head wearily, the adrenaline still pulsing rapidly through his bloodstream, sending bursts of energy to his wings and lungs, though the retreating terrorists were long gone into the distance. What had they wanted? Why attack such an innocent little village? What could *possibly* warrant so much destruction?

"*Cloud*!" Coal yelled again, snapping him back into the present. "Come on! What are you *waiting* for? Let's *go* after them!" He eagerly put on a burst of speed, kicking into the air in an attempt to chase the creatures, but Cloud held out a talon to stop him.

"*Wait*," he instructed. "It might be a trap. We don't know what we're up against." *Or why that dragon called me a Defender,* or *how he knew Clouddusk was our guardian.* "Let them go. Come on," he went on, shaking away the millions of questions forming in the back of his mind. "Search and rescue for now. The village and villagers should be our first priority."

"*Ugh*. All right. I'm on it." With a small frown, Coal turned and winged it to the far side of the valley, disappearing moments later behind a plume of smoke and leaving Cloud hovering awkwardly above the blazing fire, still trying to riddle out all the unanswered pieces of the puzzle. Slowly, his mind rotated back to the sea drake who'd mysteriously disappeared right before the siege began.

He'd known about the invasion *before* it had happened.

He'd *also* known Cloud was blue, though his scales had been sufficiently shielded by his cloak at the time, which should have been *impossible*.

He'd tried to warn him of the dangers, though Cloud had not understood his intentions at the time. *And* he'd addressed him as a Defender long before the dragons who *weren't really* dragons did.

So, when he thought about it, that only left two *real* questions unanswered; who were those dragons and *why* did everyone keep calling him a Defender?

# Chapter 4

"*What were you* thinking*?"*

Cloud recoiled from the venomous fury laced in his mentor's words, panic erupting like butterflies through his chest. *I knew it. I knew it. He's mad. And he has every right to be. We disobeyed him. We went into the village when we* knew *we weren't supposed to. He should be upset.*

*Great stars, he* should *ground us for the rest of our lives!*

*"*Of all the dumb things I've put up with from you over the years, this has *got* to be the dumbest," Clouddusk growled as he dropped into the tall grass. Cautiously, Cloud and Coal followed suit. The scent of smoke still hung in the air, though it was not nearly as strong as it had been. Cloud suspected that was due to the fragile nature of his dreams. Ever since the previous morning, he'd been seeing the town burning in his mind. He hadn't been able to get rid of it, though, with a glance toward Coal who once more seemed indignant, he suspected he might be the only one.

He shuddered when Clouddusk whirled around to face them, anger burning his emerald eyes. "Would one of you care to explain what you thought you were *doing* in that town? You both know the risks. What if Star had been *seen*? You could have jeopardized *everything!*"

"Clouddusk," Cloud gasped, dragging his wings along behind him, too exhausted to hold them up. "I—"

"Not *now*, Star. Can't you see I'm busy scolding you?"

"Okay," Coal said hastily, running after Clouddusk as the gray dragon wove his way through the weeds. "So maybe we got a bit carried away, but everything turned out okay, didn't it? We didn't get hurt, and we practically saved the town!"

"That's *beside* the point," Clouddusk snarled. "You should never have *been* there in the first place! Star, *you* especially. Don't you

understand the risks you took?"

"Yes, sir," Cloud said quickly. "But we were just--"

"But *nothing*," Clouddusk growled. "You *knew* you weren't supposed to go into the town and you did so anyway. You disobeyed me. And for that, you are going to have to be punished." He spun back around to face them, and both hatchlings came to a screeching halt. "Now, listen to me *very carefully,*" he went on. "I want the two of you to go back to your cave and I want you to forget you *ever* saw any of this. Do you understand me?"

"But what about--" Coal began.

"*Do you understand me*?" Clouddusk repeated.

"Yes, Clouddusk," Cloud said quickly, interrupting Coal as the hatchling opened his mouth to shoot another remark. One that *would* get them grounded for all eternity no doubt. Coal glared at him, but Cloud pointedly ignored it. "But answer us one thing first. Those creatures back there--what were they? They weren't dragons. *There's no way."*

"They're called Shades," Clouddusk admitted grudgingly. "They inhabit the Dream Realm and are creatures of pure darkness. They feed on love and all things that are light. While they were originally meant to be trapped in the spirit realm forever, it seems that they have somehow been brought back to reality."

"You mean," Coal stammered, eyes widening. "Like...like *ghosts*?"

"No, they are *much* worse than ghosts. But they are none of your concern. What *is* your concern is the amount of trouble the two of you are going to be in unless you go home *right now* and *never* speak of any of this *ever* again."

"But—" Coal started.

Cloud smacked him in the face with a wing.

"*Ow*! What was *that* for?"

"Let's just go home," Cloud hissed to him. He tried to steer his friend away, but Coal wouldn't budge. "Coal*, really.* We should go. We've got...homework."

"Homework?" Coal echoed, clearly not getting the message. "But Cloud...we don't go to school..."

"*Come on*!" Cloud growled through clenched teeth, wrapping a wing around the midnight dragon and dragging him away. "We've got something we need to do. Back home. *Right now*."

Coal looked at him strangely but didn't try to resist as they moved away from the meadow and Clouddusk's furious glare, the gray drake watching them until they were long out of sight and the dream world faded once more to reality. "Cloud," he whispered as they were shrouded by the tree shadows. "What are you *doing*? Homework? What *is* this gibberish?"

"I just figured something out," Cloud responded as they walked. "*How* did those Shades find that village so quickly? How long do you think they have been free? And why do they not seem to fare well in the daylight?"

"I don't know."

"And *another* thing, if those things were after the village, why did they seem to know who I was?"

"No idea."

"Something's up," Cloud growled. "And somehow, I think we're both involved."

"*Us*?" Coal deadpanned. "But how is that possible? We're here because Clouddusk found us as eggs. Our parents left us."

"I know the story," Cloud agreed. "But what if there's more to it?"

"More to it? What *more* could there *be*? We know why we're here. We know how we're here. What exactly are you expecting to find? And exactly *how* do you plan to find said information?" Coal hurried to keep up. His blue eyes were wide with confusion. Cloud couldn't

say he blamed him. It was a stretch, even for him.

"I don't know that yet," he admitted. "But I think there may be something in those scrolls that he left for us. A clue or something."

"You're making this seem like a treasure hunt," Coal pointed out. "But what if you're just overthinking it? I mean...what are you looking for? Where would you even begin your search?"

"A Defender," Cloud muttered, half to himself, not paying attention to Coal. "I know I've heard that somewhere before. But what is it?"

"A Defender," Coal sighed, giving up the argument, "is a dragon gifted with unusual power, destined to protect the universe from destruction."

Cloud came to a screeching halt. "*What*?"

"Don't you ever pay attention to all those scrolls you read?" Coal exhaled, trudging past Cloud and shaking his wings irritably. They crossed a small stream and lumbered up a large hill, dodging oak trees and nosy raccoons. "A Defender is someone special. It's every hatchling's dream to be one. Of course, there haven't been any Defenders for hundreds of years, but Clouddusk himself was a Defender once."

Cloud perked up. "Really?"

"Yes. Defender of the Sea, I believe. That was before Darkwhisperer. Before any of this, really." He gestured around at the long-abandoned forest. "One could say the Defenders are a forgotten legend. No one remembers the dangers and trials. They only remember the power that came with the title."

"Trials?"

"Oh, yeah, don't you remember?" Coal glanced over at him. "Dragons don't just *become* Defenders. They have to *earn* it. They may be born with the ability, but only by passing a series of trials can they receive that power. Five stones await the five chosen Defenders at the conclusion of these trials but the path to get there is filled with danger. Not all who set out on the quests survive.

Hence the lack of heroes recently."

"Coal, could *that* be it?"

"What?" Coal asked, looking confused.

"Could *we* be Defenders? Is that why Clouddusk took us in?"

"I doubt it. Neither of us has ever shown any sign of power, have we?"

"Well...no."

"Then we aren't Defenders," Coal answered gloomily. "No powers equal no superhero status. Sorry, Cloud, but I don't think that's our calling." He opened his wings and prepared to kick off from the ground. "Besides, Clouddusk would have told us if we were Defenders, wouldn't he?"

*At one time, I would have agreed with you*, Cloud thought as he hastily unfurled his wings and prepared to follow. *But now, I'm not so sure.* Clouddusk had grown so secretive over the years. It was hard to tell when he was telling the truth and when he wasn't. "Well, then, let's see if we can find anything about the Shades," he called to Coal. "There has to be something that can explain this mystery. Clouddusk is here, somehow. So, let's start with that."

Cloud caught up with Coal as they neared their caverns. Coal angled his wings and ducked down for the land. Cloud hung back for a moment, staring at the cloudless sky. It was so blue and so free. What would it take for him to fly away in it and never come back?

*Don't be ridiculous*, he chided himself. *You know you'd never make it out there on your own. This is your home and this is where you should stay for always. Besides, if you* did *leave, where would you go? What would you do?* He would be hunted for his blue scales. He would never be safe. He could never have the kind of quiet life that other dragons would wish away. No little ranch with cows and sheep roaming free (and let's be honest, he'd probably eat them anyway) or a home with a family that loved and cherished him. He'd be

alone. Always alone. And that in itself was a truly frightening thought.

Tilting his wings, he glided down to join Coal just as the black hatchling ducked through the vine-covered entrance and disappeared inside. Cloud followed him, dipping his head and folding his wings to fit in through the small opening and down the narrow passageways.

"Why are you so interested in learning what those things back there were?" Coal asked, his voice bouncing off of the walls and colliding into the sounds of rushing water. They turned down a left corridor which led to an underground river. "They weren't of this world so why bother trying to riddle it out? Why not just let Clouddusk handle it?"

"You didn't see it," Cloud answered. "I hit them with the most powerful attack that we've been taught. It did nothing to them. They didn't even flinch. I want to know how that is possible."

"It was pretty dark up there, pal. Are you sure you didn't just miss?"

"No. I hit one and it went right through it."

"They *are* dead, you know. You can't hit a phantom."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Cloud retorted.

"Clouddusk is a ghost."

"Clouddusk is a dragon who is very solid in the Dream Realm," Cloud shot back. "I can touch Clouddusk. I can't touch these things." A shiver ran from the tips of his horns to the tip of his tail. *I can't hurt them. What happens if they come back*? *What if they hurt someone else?*

"Okay, so they're different than *most* ghosts. But they are still ghosts and you *can't hurt* ghosts. So, what are you thinking?"

"I honestly don't know," Cloud confessed. "I guess I'll just start looking. I'm sure I'll know when I find it."

Coal snorted but said nothing. He turned toward a wide passageway that led to their bed chambers. Cloud elected to go the other way, back toward the library. "Laugh all you want," he growled as they began to go their separate ways, "but something odd is going on around here and I'm going to find out what."

"Yeah, good luck with that." Coal lumbered off down the passageway and was swallowed up by the darkness moments later, leaving Cloud standing alone in a deserted corridor. Cloud, however, marched down the adjacent hallway which led to the lake and scrolls. He just hoped he could find the information he was looking for.

Picking a scroll titled *The Forgotten Adventures,* Cloud settled down beside the water to read. He serenely dipped his tail and one talon in, feeling the rushing sense of relief wash over him. It was as if all his aches and pains had just been rinsed away entirely. It had always been this way. Cloud didn't know why. He wasn't a water dweller from Watterlaek. He had no reasoning for why this made him feel better. It just *did*. It was something that neither he nor Coal fully understood but neither had ever been brave enough to ask Clouddusk about it.

With a sigh, he unraveled the scroll and began to read.

*The age of heroes has long been considered at a close. And, indeed, this may be the truth. The last of the real heroes lived almost one thousand years ago (See: **Defenders**), before the Blazing. It is rumored that there are yet more heroes out there, hiding, waiting for the right time to reveal themselves. But who they are and where they might be remains a mystery.*

*Defenders*. Cloud flipped over the page and scanned until he found the bold heading.

*The Defenders were an elite team of dragons tasked with the protection of Dragnaple and the removal of all serious threats to dragon kind's survival. This team, known commonly as the Winged Five, was led by a Raynbow dragon named **Clouddusk,** who could contort and control water. Under his leadership were four other hatchlings. **Violettail**, a water-dweller with the capability to bend light. **Cyclone**, a jungle dragon*

*with the ability to sear anything he touched.* ***Stormtail****, a sky dragon who could create earthquakes with his bare talons. And* ***Sparkwind****, a desert dragon with the power to control the weather and summon elemental changes. These five dragons protected and served the nine realms to the extent of their abilities, imprisoning several of the galaxy's most notorious super villains, such as* ***Dark Night*** *and* ***Time Master****. They were truly the last of the real heroes.*

Cloud skimmed down to the part about Clouddusk.

*Clouddusk, son of Starlight and Heavenshine, was the first dragon to receive his power and the last leader of the* ***Defenders.*** *It is said that he was the one who ultimately saved the universe from Dark Night, a dragon that he once had trusted and considered a friend, by sacrificing his own power to overcome the darkness in the evil dragon's heart. Though the legends have never been proven, it was rumored that Clouddusk had two sons. One, Gale Dusk, grew to become a Defender just like his father but was struck down by Time Master during the Blazing. The other son was said to be killed by Dark Night's henchmen only shortly after his hatching. Clouddusk left no heirs to the power of the sea and no hope for the rest of the galaxy.*

*That's so sad.* Cloud hadn't had any idea all this had happened to Clouddusk. *No wonder he's so tough on us. He's afraid that what happened to his sons might happen to us.* Suddenly, he felt deeper respect for the dragon he called his father. All these years and Cloud had never taken the time to put it all together.

Something moved in his brain and, on instinct, he unrolled the scroll a little bit more and his eyes fell on a new section. *The Defender Trials*.

*Every hatchling's dream is to be a Defender. All have a desperate, but fleeting, hope that they are somehow related to the five original Defenders or have been selected to become the next generation of heroes. But even if some lucky hatchling were to show signs of early magic development, they would still have to face a Trial to prove that they were truly chosen. A Trial, as mentioned by Clouddusk in his notes, consists of three tests. A test of knowledge, a test of honesty, and a test of courage. Only the hatchling that passes all three may continue. There are rumored to be five trials, one for each Defender, and each is said to*

*be as difficult as the next. There is no way of knowing, however, where these trials are, or if they even still exist.*

Reaching the end, Cloud sighed and slowly began to roll the scroll back up. He stood, shaking the water from his talon and his tail. As he did so, the water gave an uncharacteristic gurgle.

Cloud froze, noticing this. Clutching the scroll close to his chest, he took a small step back. The water lurched again. *Is there something in there?* he wondered. *A frog?* He moved to the left, toward the door, ready to move but at the same time, unsure exactly what it was he was supposed to be moving *from.*

The water suddenly exploded onto the bank.

With a yelp, Cloud jumped into the air, clawing desperately at a stalactite as he gazed down at the rivulets of water that had appeared out of nowhere and were now gushing upwards at the force of a geyser. "COAL!" he shrieked, opening his wings as he attempted to stay balanced.

"Coming!" came the black dragon's response. "Hold on!"

There was a clatter from down the hall and a moment later, his brother came charging through the entrance and almost slipped on the wet rocks. "What in all of *Dragnaple?*" he gasped, looking from the water up to Cloud and then back again with a balanced amount of confusion and awe. "*What* did you *do*?"

"What did *I* do? What do you *mean,* '*What did I do*?'" Cloud snapped. "I didn't do *anything*! The water just attacked me!"

"Okay*, first* off, that sounds *completely* insane. And second, *WHAT* THE *FLIPPING* FISH IS GOING ON HERE? *Where* did all of this *come* from?"

"The river!" Cloud responded. "I was just reading when it started moving on its own!"

"Okay, okay, there *has* to be a logical explanation for all of this!" Coal stammered, though it sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than Cloud. "*Think*! Were you doing anything that

you think could have caused this?"

"NO!" Cloud bellowed ferociously.

"All right, then, can you maybe tell it to *go back*?"

"IT'S A *LAKE*, COAL! HOW CAN I TELL IT TO DO *ANYTHING*?"

"Just *try*," Coal pleaded. "Because, honestly, this is the *weirdest* thing I have ever seen and it's kinda freaking me out!"

*Thanks for the vote of confidence there*. Cloud rolled his eyes and sighed. *All right. Here goes nothing*. He shut his eyes tight and focused every nerve of his being on trying to connect with the water. *Go back*, he tried to telepath to it. *Go back to the lake. Back up. Back up.* He could feel the tension in the air. He felt like his brain was about to explode. *This is a stupid idea. It'll never work. It's just water. It's not like it has a brain to listen to me.*

"CLOUD! It's WORKING!"

*What?* Cloud opened one eye and looked down. Sure enough, the water around Coal's paws was beginning to retreat. The black hatchling watched with wonder as the water slowly slid back into the lake and lay still as though it had never moved to invade the land to begin with.

With a breath of relief, Cloud released the stalactite and thumped back to the floor with a hefty sigh of relief.

Coal stared at him, wide-eyed.

"*What?"* Cloud demanded, seeing his look. "You *told* me to try."

"I...I don't *believe* it," Coal gasped. "C-cloud. D-do you know what this *means?"*

"So, I can talk to the water," Cloud growled, flicking his tail irritably. He knew where Coal's mind had gone, and he wanted to steer it away from that result as quickly as possible. "So what?"

"Cloud, don't you *get* it? Dragons can't just move water with their

minds!" Coal protested. "There's only *one* dragon in history who has been able to do that! *Cloud*! I *know* why those dragons were so interested in you now! You...you *are* a Defender! And...I don't know *how*, but you've inherited Clouddusk's power!"

# Chapter 5

*No. No. No, no, no, no, no*!

Coal looked as though he had just won the lottery.

It felt more like a blow to the gut to Cloud. A *Defender*? It *had* to be some kind of cruel joke! There was *no way* in all of the Dark Realm *he* could have been selected to be a protector of Dragnaple! There were *so* many reasons why he *couldn't* be a Defender. The Defenders were strong, smart, and daring. They were the true heroes. Not dragons like *him*. It wasn't possible. It just didn't happen. Not to *him*. Not now. Not *ever*.

"*No*."

Coal, who'd been staring dumbly at him for the last minute and a half, started. "No?" he echoed. "What do you *mean* 'no'?"

"You know *exactly* what I mean."

Coal leaped to his paws in outrage. "*No*!" he yelped. "No way! I won't allow it! I'm putting my talon down *right now*! You are *not* throwing an opportunity like this away!"

"*Watch* me."

"Cloud. Hopeful. *Star*. You *can't* do this! Do you realize what you would be *giving up*? You've been chosen! Thousands of hatchlings would give an *arm* and a *leg* for what you've got!"

"Well, give it to one of *them* then," Cloud grumbled. "Just leave *me* out of it!" He turned and started walking away. There *had* to be more important things to do than listen to this nonsense. He had fish to catch, sparring techniques to perfect. He didn't have to stay here and take this nonesense. And he *wouldn't.*

"Cloud? *Cloud*!" Coal charged down the hallway after him. "It's not *that* bad! So, *what* if you are a blue-scaled dragon that everyone

fears and wants to destroy? Doesn't nature seem to have a way of working itself out for the best?"

"Only *this* nature has a name and messed up *big* time," Cloud shot back, shaking out his wings tiredly. "*Look*, Coal, being a Defender...it just isn't for *me*. I'm not the kind of reptile who will dive headfirst into a battle if I can avoid it."

"Says the dragon who leaped *straight* into that fight back there without even the *slightest* regard for his own well-being," Coal fired back in return. "And before you start, you *are* brave and strong. And blue scales or no, you are *exactly* what this world needs. Will you accept that or am I going to have to *bash* it into your *thick head*?"

"This is *insane*!" Cloud exclaimed. *Never in a million years could I have envisioned this. A Defender.* I'm *a Defender.* "And the even *crazier* thing is that I *believe* you! Now what?" he questioned, glancing at Coal for guidance. "Is there some sort of initiation ceremony or am I just *automatically* a Defender?"

"Don't look at *me*!" Coal protested, throwing his talons up in shock. "I'm not Clouddusk! How should *I* know?"

"You're the one who knew about Clouddusk's team in the *first* place!" Cloud exclaimed. "You must know *something*!" He noticed Coal's wide-eyed expression. "*Anything*?"

"Well," Coal stammered, "a-according to the stories--"

"Which we now know are more than stories."

"*Right*. Anyway, the scrolls say that a true Defender--"

"--must pass a deadly trial, *yes,* I know," Cloud interjected, exhaling tiredly and letting his gaze drift toward the bubbling water once more.

Coal looked at him flatly. "Do you want my help or not?"

He was being *serious*. Cloud could see it in his eyes. These weren't just stories to him. They were *true*. And Cloud was definitely *not* an expert in ancient folklore. He was going to *need* Coal's help, so he

figured it would be better to listen and not ruffle Coal's scales too soon.

"Yes," he hastily corrected himself. "Yes, please continue."

"I need something to write with," Coal grunted, standing up and moving from one shadow to another as silently as a ghost. "Can I use a piece of charcoal from your room?"

"Uh...yeah sure."

"Thanks." There was a rattle and Cloud could hear Coal's tail as he shuffled across the room and off down the hall.

Cloud sat there in silence, waiting. It was almost too much to take in. How could he have been chosen as a Defender? Him, a blue dragon, a hatchling born to rampage and destroy. Had Clouddusk chosen him? Why? *He must have run out of options*, Cloud thought dryly. What other reason could there have been? Cloud knew he wasn't the kind of dragon anyone would select unless they'd run *completely* out of other candidates.

*If that's the case, why pick me and not Coal?*

The question rattled around inside his brain. Coal was a better fighter. He was more resilient. He was stronger and he was faster. Coal was the natural choice for a Defender.

Coal was a hatched hero.

Cloud was a hatched disaster.

In any other world, the two of them would likely have ended up on opposing sides of the spectrum. Hero and villain. They'd be intent on destroying one another. Cloud was glad such a world didn't exist. He struggled to imagine a reality where he hadn't grown up alongside Coal. They'd been friends since the day they hatched. Brothers, even if not by blood.

Coal's talons clattered against the smooth granite as he reemerged. Immediately he went toward the wall and began to shape an image onto the limestone. "Dragnaple," he began, "is a galaxy containing

nine known planets--or *Realms*. It is rumored to be a tentative seven thousand years old and life has been co-existing with dragon-kind since the beginning of time. The first civilization was founded by King Ash on Starrlande about a hundred years later. Several generations passed and the kingdom prospered in an era of peace and technological advancements. Ash lived a long life and, over time, had many hatchlings. Eight of them, to be precise. After many decades, however, the dragonets began to grow dissatisfied with what they had and started to quarrel amongst themselves. This eventually led to the Blazing--a full-scale war in which no one could hope to be the victor--three thousand years later."

"To prevent mass genocide, King Ash banished his children and their followers on the remaining eight planets. From there, the eight Realms began to grow, each according to their environmental advantages. Those who were banished to Watterlaek learned to swim well and designed their entire kingdom under the sea. Those who were banished to Tundrae learned to survive in the bleak nothingness of ice. And so it went with the rest of the kingdoms. "

"Is there a *point* to this story?" Cloud interjected. "I don't mean to be rude, but how does this concern me? It's all ancient history."

"Just wait," Coal answered as he sketched eight rough circles onto the wall. "You'll see. The important part is what comes next." He drew lines connecting the circles (which Cloud supposed where the planets). "King Ash did not wish to be permanently separated from his children so he created a kind of bridge between the Realms so his descendants could always find a way back home. Legends say it is a portal." His voice dropped a few decimals in an eerie fashion. "A portal that can only be activated by dragon's blood."

"*Blood*?" Cloud wrinkled his snout. "Isn't that just a *little* gruesome? Why not a talon-pad or eye-scanner?"

"Technology of that extent was not known at that time," Coal explained. "But imagine the possibilities if the portals could be found! For the first time in centuries, the Realms could be connected! All dragons could come together as one!"

"And start a *second* galaxy-wide war?" Cloud sighed heavily. "That

sounds like a hundred ways for something to go terribly wrong and for the planets to detonate into fire and death like something in your science fiction scrolls."

"And that's all science fiction *is,"* Coal argued. "*Fiction*. It has no scientific value whatsoever. Strange two-legged beings that fly huge metal contraptions through space and time, shooting and killing each other with laser weapons? That's not realistic *or* scientific."

"Since when did *you* become an expert on what's scientific?" Cloud questioned, meandering around the hall, intent on looking at *anything* but what Coal had drawn on the wall.

"Since *I* actually pay attention in class." Coal sighed and flopped down on a rock across the way. "Look, the point of the story is this; King Ash built the portals so his family wouldn't always be apart but, after his death, dragons started using them for their own selfish reasons, creating a mad conquering spree. It's rumored that the first blue dragon appeared about the same time as the portals were being built. Perhaps that is the key to your past, Cloud. Maybe *that* can explain why you were chosen."

"So where *is* this portal?" Cloud quizzed.

"That's the catch. Only a few individuals have ever been able to find them. And even then, not many have ventured far enough to explore the depths of their *true* abilities."

"What happened to those who *did*?"

Coal shrugged. "Nobody knows. No one's heard from them again."

"Well, *that's* not ominous at all," Cloud growled sarcastically. "So how are *we* supposed to find them if everyone who's tried has ended up *missing*?"

"Legend has it the Winged Five found it once," Coal explained. "Clouddusk accidentally used it to jump to Watterlaek, where he met Violettail."

"Yes, yes, I know the story," Cloud interjected. *Everything always seems to come full circle and end up with Clouddusk. How much has he*

*been keeping from us?* "So, he would know?"

"If the legends are true, yes."

"So, let's go ask him." Cloud adjusted his wings and started down the passageway toward the surface. "And then we find out just what in Dragnaple is going on."

"And exactly *how* do you plan on doing that?" Coal questioned, following him. "Clouddusk may be in the Dream Realm but that's a *big* area. How do you *plan* on finding him?"

*Coal's right*, Cloud realized, much to his disappointment. *I* don't *know where Clouddusk is*. To find one dragon in the whole vast expanse of the heavenly realm would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

He groaned.

Coal noticed this and paused near the entrance to the caves. Outside, Cloud could hear the steady plunking of raindrops and the gentle wind that rustled the trees and sent leaves twirling to the grass. *At least the rain should put out the rest of the fire*. He felt bad for the dragons who lived in the village. No one deserved what had happened to them. He was even more disappointed in himself for not being able to help. He just couldn't get the thought out of his mind. If only he'd been stronger or...or *quicker*, then maybe he could have been able to save them.

Coal seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. "Being a Defender can change everything. And since you're blue, you have a chance to make even a bigger difference," he reminded him. "So, there's no need to be worried."

"I'm not worried," Cloud lied.

Coal gave him a withering glare.

"Well, I'm *not*!" Cloud protested. "And don't give me that look!" He glanced away from his friend and stepped out into the rain, ignoring it as it trickled down his horns to his snout. He took a deep breath, enjoying the freshness in the air. He felt Coal's curious gaze

burn into his back and turned, spotting the hatchling watching him from the safety of the caves.

"So, you're not concerned at all about having a team?" Coal called after him.

Cloud skidded to a halt. His talons slid on the wet grass and he almost fell flat on his face. "*Team*?" he echoed, whipping around to face him. "Who said *anything* about a team?"

Coal looked ready to facepalm. "*Cloud*. A Defender isn't just one dragon! Clouddusk had a team! Four other dragons which he fought and trained with and trusted with his life! I'm *sure* you'll be getting a team as well!"

"How absolutely *delightful*," Cloud groaned, suddenly regretting ever bringing the subject up in the first place. "I bet I'll last about a minute-and-a-half against four *highly trained warriors*. Send flowers to my grave, would you? And say something nice at my funeral?"

"Oh, come *on*, Cloud, you're not going to die," Coal scoffed. "Just you wait and see. I'm sure they'll *love* you." He followed his friend out into the rain, blinking as he took the lead and headed down the slope toward a small pond.

Cloud snorted. "I doubt it."

The rain was coming down by the bucketful as two hatchlings reached the pond. Coal settled down underneath the cover of a large willow. Water poured down his head and his neck, all the way to his tail, and he shuddered. "I'll *never* understand how you enjoy this," he complained, flicking an ear and sending the water flying. "Icky revolting water. And what good does it do? Takes perfectly good dirt and makes it into nasty mud."

Cloud sat in a patch of reeds beside the pond, staring into its enticing aquamarine surface. Below the waves, he could see schools of bluegill floating lazily about. Sometimes he wished he could just swim away like the fish, escape forever. But not now. Now he had a purpose. A responsibility. To run away now would be to show weakness. Cloud was *many* things, but a coward was *not* one of

them.

He blinked and glanced up, suddenly noticing how quiet it had become. "Coal?" he called, no longer hearing the soft grumbling of his brother. He got no reply. "Coal?" he repeated, more urgently, starting to get to his paws. "*Coal*! Where are--"

A talon came flying out of the mist and clocked Cloud in the back of the head. Cloud let out a shocked yelp as the force of the impact sent him careening backward. His talons slipped and he fell into the pond with a tremendous splash.

As soon as the water enveloped his head, he began to panic. *Help! Someone! Please! Help! I can't...I can't swim*! He thrashed wildly, lungs throbbing as the waves bashed him on all sides. *I'm drowning! Somebody help*! He clawed desperately for the surface. He could see it, hovering just out of reach. He could see a figure standing there, possibly watching him. His attacker or Coal?

*Help me!* he cried mentally to whoever it was.

His breath was running out. He could see the underwater world beginning to fade around him. He swung his head around, struggling to clear his vision, searching for a ledge or something to grab on to. There was nothing. The pond was entirely smooth. His talons brushed the bottom. Sand. He wouldn't even be able to get a good grip on the floor to push himself up.

He suspected his attacker had known this.

Everything was going dark around him. *Coal!* Cloud opened his mouth to roar and a jet of bubbles came shooting out. He thought of his friend. What would happen to him now? He would be by himself. And what about Dragnaple? He was supposed to be a Defender! He was supposed to protect them! But he'd failed, killed by the very element he was supposed to wield. Ironic in every sense of the word.

That was the last thing he remembered as his breath ran out and he sunk into unconsciousness.

*The forest was on fire.*

*Dragons were dying.*

*He stood amid a ring of flames, searching desperately for a way out. The fire licked his face and scorched his scales. He leaped backward, swinging his head around, scanning the clearing for some way to escape.*

*Pain shot through his tail and up his spine and he whirled around with a roar of anguish as the fire crept nearer and nearer. The flames seemed to be alive, hissing and spitting at him. He felt a whimper rise in his throat and he could barely force it back down. He laid his ears back, feeling his legs trembling as fear pierced his heart.*

*"You think you're* good enough*?"*

*The hiss seemed to come from everywhere. Cloud whipped around, searching for the owner of the voice. The trees beyond the ring were pitch black. He could see nothing but his own reflection in the flames. A terrified hatchling. A failure. A blue mistake that should never have happened.*

*"You think you're* worthy*?"*

*The flames suddenly erupted. Cloud screamed silently, his voice non-existent. He scrambled backward, casting fleeting looks around him as though expecting the speaker to suddenly materialize out of the inferno.*

*"You were never going to be a hero. You never had what it took. You were* never *good enough," the voice sneered. "How could a blue dragon like* you*...ever be* anything *but a monster?"*

*The flames closed in.* Clouddusk*! Cloud shrieked silently.* Where are you*? This was a dream. It had to be. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. He tried to scream aloud but no sound came out. He felt constricted. The fire was on top of him now, driving him to the ground, forcing him to throw his wings over his head and prepare for the end.* CLOUDDUSK!

*A roar split the darkness.*

*"WAKE. UP!"*

*The world exploded around him. The fire blew out instantly. The earth fell away underneath him and he dropped. Down…down…down…so far he could see nothing but blackness.*

And then he was thrown roughly out of the dream

# Chapter 6

Cloud regained consciousness slowly, feeling every nerve in his body erupt into blistery pain. His tail brushed against the soft grass and his talons clenched the gritty dirt beneath him. He cautiously took a breath, fearing he'd inhale only water. The air was fresh and cool, coated with sunlight and just a hint of rain.

*Grass?* his bleary mind groaned. *Sunshine? Dirt? This isn't right. Where am I?*

Wherever he was, it clearly wasn't Snowfalle anymore.

Grimacing from the pain in his sides and the roots of his wings, he wearily lifted his head and blinked open his eyes, wincing at the sudden blast of sunlight. He shook his head to clear his vision, blinking away the light bursts dancing before his vision.

And *that* was when he realized someone was standing in front of him.

Cloud groaned and struggled to lift himself. "Clouddusk?" he moaned, not bothering to look up and confront his mentor.

*"Wrong.* Guess again." It was a different voice, one he'd never heard before. Low. Threatening. *Definitely* feminine, he assessed. Slowly, he lifted his gaze to find himself staring into the blazing golden eyes of a dark purple she-dragon. It took only a moment for Cloud to guess who this was.

"*Violettail*," he breathed in awe. She was *beautiful*. Even more so than the scrolls made her out to be. Her talons and horns glowed with a ghostly light and her fish-like tail swung back and forth in a slight warning of irritation. "You're...you're *real*."

Violet snorted a plume of black smoke. "*Bright*, aren't you? *Of course*, I'm real, you shrimp-brain! What did you think, that Clouddusk was the *only* Defender of his day?"

"Well, no," Cloud grunted, trying desperately not to offend the legendary Defender of Light. "I just--" He gulped, realizing he didn't know where he was going with this. "Where are we?" he added, glancing around at the glowing woods surrounding them. "This isn't part of the Dream Realm. It *can't* be."

"Of course, it is," Violet repeated with a huff. "Where else would it be? *Marblerivver*? I don't see a lot of desert, do you?"

"I've never seen this part of the forest before," Cloud responded, deciding to ignore the last part of her question. His eyes fell on a small pool a few yards to his right and, immediately, he felt it begin to draw him in. "What's that?" he questioned.

Violet's eyes followed his gaze. "The Pool of Reflection," she answered.

"It's beautiful," Cloud breathed, taking a step toward it.

Violet suddenly flicked her tail out in front of his chest, blocking his path. "Not yet," she told him. "You must wait for the others."

"Others?" Cloud blinked. "*What* others?"

"Surely you didn't think you just happened to dream-leap here by accident, did you?" Violet looked smug, as though enjoying not telling him anything. "You were called. *Just* as they were and just as *we* were once. Here, the Defender is born. This has been a tradition upheld for *many* generations." She stared toward the pool with a look of wistfulness. Perhaps she was remembering the time when she herself was chosen, all those many years ago.

"This way," the dragoness suddenly snapped, holding out a wing and guiding him away from the pool. "The others should be arriving shortly."

Cloud allowed her to lead him. So many questions were forming in his brain. Where was he? What was the Pool of Reflection? Where was Clouddusk? *Why are* you *here?* He swallowed nervously as they passed out of the clearing and into a dense grove of sycamores Cloud could have sworn hadn't been there moments before. "So," he

began, attempting to make conversation. "You and Clouddusk..." Her gaze snapped toward him and her eyes narrowed. Cloud felt the intense pressure of the glare on his scales but did his best to push it aside and continue. "Were the two of you ever...a thing?" He struggled to phrase his question and felt her gaze grow even hotter. "I read somewhere that--"

"You mean, did Clouddusk and I ever like each other?" Violet translated; her voice cold. "Once upon a time, when we were both *much* younger--and very much alive. He even proposed to me. Did your scrolls tell you that?" Her tone was one of longing. She'd loved him--and easily still could. There was a powerful bond between them, one unbroken *even* in death. Cloud didn't have to be an expert in emotions to see *that.*

"No. I didn't know," Cloud admitted. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up—"

"It wasn't meant to be," Violet continued, shaking her head ruefully. "He was of one world and I of another. We knew the rules and it became impossible for us to be together. Eventually, we broke it off and went our separate ways."

"But what about Gale?" Cloud questioned, hurrying as she picked up the pace. "He's your son, isn't he? What happened to him?"

"The legends got that part wrong," Violet explained. "Gale *isn't* my son. His mother was a Raynbowfalles noble who'd been arranged to marry Clouddusk. He stayed with her. I don't think he ever quite forgave me for leaving. Head down, there are some low vines up ahead."

Cloud obeyed, shuddering as the cold vines wove down his back like serpents. "And your *other* son? The one who disappeared? What about him?"

A glint sparked across her eyes, providing Cloud with all the confirmation he required. "No one knows," she responded, her voice tense. "He's been gone for *many* years now. We've searched the Dream Realm ten times over and still, there's been no sign of him."

"Was Clouddusk *his* father? Do you think it's possible he's still alive?" Cloud hated himself for perhaps getting her hopes up. But it *was* possible wasn't it? The Dream Realm was the realm of the dead. If attempts to find this half-raynbow, half-sea drake had failed, perhaps that meant he *still* survived somehow, even after all this time.

"No."

"No to which one? Clouddusk *was* the father, wasn't he?"

Violet huffed. "'No' as in 'No more questions.' By the *stars*, you ask a *lot* of them. Come on. Keep up. We're almost there now."

They walked a little further into the trees. Cloud's ears twitched toward the faint gurgle of a stream. They came to the edge of the woods and he followed her gaze down a sharp decline. Below them, a river filed outwards into a small pond. Around the pond were several odd-looking stones, all glistening from the moonlight reflected in the water.

*Moonlight*?

Cloud glanced up, realizing suddenly that the sky was now dark and that stars littered the heavens. *Time works very differently here,* he reminded himself. One minute in reality could be an hour in a dream or vice-versa. One would never know what to expect.

For Dragnaple's sake, he'd even seen *flying pigs* once.

It was all the make-up of a dragon's dreams. Clouddusk was what he called a Dream Leaper, meaning he could travel from one dream to another and sometimes even bring living dragons with him using their subconscious states—their minds could voyage while their physical bodies remained back on the Realms. It was a rare gift, his mentor had explained. Very *few* dragons had possessed it a thousand years before when he'd been alive. None were confirmed in the Realms now.

*So who pulled me out of that nightmare and brought me here*?

It certainly hadn't been Clouddusk--he'd know that voice anywhere.

And it hadn't been Violettail, though she'd been there when he awoke. The voice had been higher than Clouddusk's—higher, but still masculine. It couldn't have been Violet. Possibly someone younger.

Someone the realms had overlooked.

*Coal*?

Somehow, Cloud doubted it. Besides, he was sure he would have recognized the hatchling's voice.

Violet sniffed impatiently. "It's just *like* them to be late."

Cloud glanced up at her. "Who?"

She looked down at him. "Who do you *think*? Stay here," she added. "Wait. Let the others arrive before you show yourself. We want them all here *before* you cause mass hysteria." With that, she turned and disappeared down a small side path that Cloud assumed led to the bottom of the ravine.

He sighed and settled down amid a cluster of tall weeds where he would have a good view of the happenings. He waited, listening to the creaks of the crickets in the trees and the soft gurgling water. Everything seemed so peaceful here. Whoever's dream this was must have felt the same. No storms thundered in the distance and no scale-biting winds slammed against him. It was certainly unusual to find a reality as mundane as this.

He spotted Violet as she made her way across the ravine and sat down to wait at the foot of the waterfall. She appeared anxious and he wondered if she was concerned about the prospect of handing the reigns over to a group of complete strangers. He knew if he were in her talons, he would be *petrified*.

*Everything is about to change*, he thought. *Now I get to be the hero instead of the villain. And maybe* now *the Realms will see that not all blue dragons are bad*.

There was a clap of thunder and Violet's gaze suddenly shot toward the sky.

Cloud immediately looked up, recognizing the tell-tale signs and knowing that someone must have arrived. He eagerly scanned the horizon for a glimpse of the newcomer. *I wonder what breed they will be*. The previous team had consisted of a raynbow drake, two jungle males, a lightning drake, and a sea dragoness. Would it be the same this time around or something entirely new?

Wingbeats.

He spotted a dark figure coming over the hills. A glint of pale yellow could be seen and, even from where Cloud was perched, he knew what kind of dragon this must be. *Marblerivver*, his mind hissed, easily identifying the desert drake not only by his hue but also by his slim, snake-like figure and long whipped tail. He watched as the hatchling, who looked to be a bit smaller than himself, landed, and trotted immediately over to Violet, nodding a friendly hello which she returned stiffly.

*That's one*.

Cloud hopefully searched the sky for signs of any others, disappointed when no wings were visible right away. He let his breath out slowly, deciding to assess the sand dragon instead. He--the dragon was definitely male--had ghostly pale scales, almost white with just a hint of yellow, sky-blue eyes, large wings, and a thick tail that ended in a deadly point. He looked to be about nineteen--eighteen at the youngest--and the golden wristband coiled around his left forearm placed him in the Royal Army, possibly a trainee. A thick black tattoo of a talon was imprinted into his neck, though what in the world it could stand for, Cloud hadn't the foggiest.

*Interesting. A warrior. Just like I told Coal*. Cloud would have to watch out for this one if the others decided it better to turn on him.

As he began to settle down again to wait, a second crack of thunder split the darkness. This was followed promptly by a low growl from across the ravine. As Cloud twisted to look, a bright pink dragon emerged from the foliage, her wings carelessly knocking aside a number of brushes and sending imaginary birds fleeing with cries to the night.

Chills danced up and down Cloud's spine. She was...well...she was like *nothing* he'd ever seen before. She was tall—possibly several inches more than him—with long talons, large wings, and dark pinkish-gold eyes. *Raynbowfalles,* he guessed, unable to think of any other Realm where dragons were so colorful. She wore no accessories other than one earring which *appeared* to be made from a jagged crocodile tooth. He couldn't imagine *what in the realm* that was for. Unlike the somewhat friendly gaze of the sand dragon, this dragon had the look of murder written *all over* her face.

The dragoness worked her way down the ledge to join the others. The yellow drake flashed her a kind, anxious smirk which she returned with a scowl as she seated herself across the clearing from him and sniffed impatiently.

*Ouch. Not very friendly are we? I wonder what her problem is. He was only trying to be friendly.*

Cloud felt a rumble grow in the back of his throat. He stood up angrily, ready to say something to her, perhaps show her how one was *supposed* to treat other dragons. As though sensing what he was about to do, Violet suddenly looked up and gave him a warning glare, reminding him of her previous words.

*That's only two. Wait. There are still two more to come.*

As though summoned by his thoughts, two more rumbles of thunder echoed through the hollow. Cloud was aware of both hatchlings in the ravine glancing toward the heavens expectantly and he found himself doing the same.

No one came.

Cloud frowned slightly, wondering if he was just hearing things. *Where are they*? he began to wonder. *What's taking so long?*

A twig cracked from somewhere behind Violet and all eyes turned toward the shrouded forest. There was a weird flicker of light and the faint smell of something burning—something that *shouldn't* have been. A moment later, a muscular claret dragon lumbered from the darkness, his head bowed and large form recoiled inwardly,

*fearfully.*

*Starrland. My age. Big scales. Smaller wings and talons.* Great stars*! What is he doing to those plants?*

Cloud watched in utter amazement as the jungle dragon timidly stepped through the tall weeds, holding his wings carefully above his head. His dark eyes were flooded with concern and Cloud could *now* see why. Where the dragon had stepped had left an imprint in the grass--a charred, *scorched* imprint.

*It's like his talons are made of fire.*

Was that even *possible*?

*Two claps of thunder,* Cloud recalled as the red dragon nervously took his seat near the water, ignoring it as it started to bubble and steam upon his approach and the other two hatchlings who must have picked up on his discomfort and were slowly inching away. *Where is the last dragon*?

The others appeared to be thinking the same as they began to scan the woods and skies for signs of life.

Everything was still.

Cold dread began to fill Cloud's stomach as the silence stretched on. What could have happened to the other dragon? Had they not made it? *Where* was Clouddusk? Wasn't he supposed to be helping? What if something had gone wrong? Cloud had heard of leaps going awry and of dragons who remained in flux—unable to continue into the dream and unable to return to their mental bodies, forever comatosed with no hope of escape.

*Is* that *what happened? Are they* dead*?*

"Apologies for the delay."

Cloud started at the deep rumble that seemed to come from right behind him. He glanced back sharply, only to realize that the owner of the voice was emerging from the weeds below them. *Clouddusk*! A great breath of relief escaped him. His mentor was okay. He'd

made it back all right.

*What about the dragon he's shielding?*

He leaned in a bit closer, noticing thin talons beneath Clouddusk's tented wing. He supposed the gray dragon had been forced to dream-leap this dragon here, though he couldn't imagine *why.*

"Well, it's *about* time," Violet snapped at him, rising to her paws at last, sending the ex-love-of-her-life a powerful and meaningful glare.

"I apologize again for our tardiness. We ran into a bit of a delay." Clouddusk stepped away from the hatchling now and removed his wing, revealing the shaking bundle of scales underneath.

*What is* that*?*

As soon as Cloud laid eyes on the hatchling, his jaw dropped, as did every hatchlings' in the hollow.

*That...that's not a dragon!*

Although he knew he was, without a doubt, a dragon, Cloud had never seen *anything* like him. He was a water-dweller. Well, at least, Cloud *guessed* he was. He didn't *look* like any of the Waterlaek dragons in the scrolls and he *certainly* did *not* resemble Violettail. He was small, smaller than any hatchling Cloud had ever seen. Cloud guessed if he were to stand next to him, the hatchling *might* reach his chest. *Barely* if he stood as straight as he could possibly be. He had small sleek scales as a Watterlaek dragon might have but no gills and his talons were *much* more like a Raynbow's. Two coils of silver wire snaked down from behind his long Monterra-like ears and wrapped around two circular pieces of glass.

*Glasses!* Cloud realized with a jolt. *That dragon has* glasses! Naturally, he'd heard of the primitive method for fixing blindness, but he hadn't thought anyone still *used* them because the lenses—and by extent, the glass ovelets themselves—were so easily smashed. They were dragons after all. Dragons and glasses did not mix.

He's *a Defender?*

The others seemed to mirror his thoughts. Both the pink and yellow dragons sprang to their talons in outrage. "You *can't* be serious!" the pink dragoness snarled, staring down at the hatchling with malice. "*Look* at him! That...that *thing* can't possibly be one of *us*!"

"Clouddusk," the desert dragon added, his voice softer than that of the female's, but not any less disapproving. "I *thought* you were calling us here to gather a team of warriors. I'm sorry," he went on, "but this one would be nothing more than a meal for those *things* out there!" He opened a wing, gesturing wildly to the darkness to make his point.

"More like an appetizer," the pink dragon growled.

The jade drake stared down at the ground, still quivering. Yet, he didn't seem angry. Just...*disappointed.* As though he'd been scorned before (possibly more than once) but had hoped for something *different* this time.

Though he was sort of thinking the same thing as the others in terms of strength, Cloud couldn't help but feel bad for the dragon. He wished he could say *something* to stop their teasing. But what could he say? He was blue. They wouldn't listen to him. Great *stars,* if they *didn't* try to kill him it would be a *miracle*. He was almost afraid to put himself out there.

Fortunately, he didn't have to.

"Leave him alone!" the jungle dragon snapped abruptly, rising to his paws to tower over them, thick tail sweeping dangerously behind him. A blazing fury was in his eyes, one that Cloud would *never* wish to come up against.

The pink dragon seemed undaunted as she turned on him. "What are you going to *do* about it, fire-scales? *Touch me*? You don't frighten *me*, Blaze. I know all about you, *monster*. I *know* what you did to your tribe and your family."

"You know *nothing*," the dragon snapped. "You have *no idea* what I

can do. *Either* of you. But make fun of that hatchling once more and you'll *learn*. And I *promise* you won't forget it."

"Rotten Starrland carcass," the she-dragon growled.

"Raynbowfalles snake," came the retort.

"That's *enough*!" Clouddusk spat, shoving his way in between the hatchlings. "Have you all forgotten why you are here and what's at stake? You're *Defenders* for the Dream Realm's sake! So *quit* quarreling and *act* like it!"

"I won't do it if *he's* here," the pink dragon snarled, glaring dangerously at the red dragon.

"And I'm not working with the *princess,*" the red dragon fired back, holding her gaze evenly.

"You're *all* working together so *quit bickering*!" Violet snapped. The two flinched at her tone and dropped their gazes to the grass. "You're supposed to be a *team*! You're the *only* thing that stands between Darkwhisperer and the *destruction* of the Realms!"

*Darkwhisperer*. A bolt of fear shot through Cloud. *He's why we're all here*? He recalled what Coal had told him. *The last time he escaped, the Winged Five were just barely able to stop him. How are* we *supposed to do any better?*

Clouddusk glanced up at him as though reading his thoughts. His look was easy to read. *They need a strong leader.*

Cloud gulped. *Can I do this? Can I lead them?* He knew he wasn't the top choice for a Defender. But, *somehow,* he'd still been chosen. There *had* to be a reason. Maybe *this* was why.

*It's time.*

The voice seemed to echo through every part of his brain. He shivered as he slowly began to stand. He shook the leaves off of his wings. He considered making a bold entrance by leaping off the cliff and gliding down to the field. Instinct told him that would be a stupid idea. He was trying *not* to cause panic. A stunt like that

would *surely* draw unwanted attention to himself.

Instead, he turned and, very quietly, began to pick his way down the side trail. With every step he took, he felt the weight of what he was getting himself into grow heavier. Internally, a war had begun.

*Enter that clearing and your life will never be the same. You go in there and you'll never be able to escape.*

*This is what I have to do.*

*You'll* die. *Just like all the others who were foolish enough to try.*

*It doesn't matter. This is the right thing to do.*

He reached the end of the path and found himself behind a cluster of trees, facing the clearing. *This is it. Now or never.*

*I can do this.*

*I can do this.*

*What in Dragnaple am I* doing*?*

He nervously took a step forward and then froze in his tracks. *What if I can't do this? What if they don't accept me?* They were not the most welcoming bunch of dragons. And he knew he would scare them more than anything they'd ever seen before. He wanted to come across as kind and gentle, not deadly and dangerous. To do that, he was going to need a much more tactful approach.

"So, *now* what?" came the pink dragon's voice.

"Now, we listen to what the Winged Five has to say." That was the yellow drake.

"*Winged Five*? More like the Winged *Two*. Where are the others? And more to the point, how are *we* supposed to be the new Defenders? There are only *four* of us!"

"He'll be along," Violet growled, cutting off their complaining. As she did, she meaningfully looked up, *right* at where Cloud was

standing, and gave him a small nod.

*This is it. No turning back now.* Cloud took a deep breath, readied himself mentally and physically, and pushed the fears to the back of his mind. *It's time.*

And then he stepped into the clearing.

# Chapter 7

Pandemonium *instantly* erupted.

The four hatchlings screamed and reared backward, wings flaring outwards in alarm. Three of them took to the sky while the green drake dove for cover behind a cluster of boulders, flattening himself against the ground as though hoping it would somehow shield him from Cloud's *untamable fury*. The scarlet dragon arched his neck menacingly and hissed from the safety of the air, ripples of orange and yellow bulging underneath his thick crimson scales. The others flanked him fearfully, looking unsure whether to stand their ground or *wing it* for the nearest hills.

*Run.*

They wanted to run *so badly*.

"Who is *this*?" the rose-tinted dragoness demanded from behind the safety of the jungle drake's wings. Then, she paused, both to rethink her words and her position. "*What* is this?"

Her words were mirrored in the expressions of the others. Fear, confusion, *anger*; Cloud felt them *all* within their heated glares. Heart pounding, he took a small step backward toward the treeline, his mind already beginning to spit out reasons to turn and run. Even so, he forced himself to stay put. This was what he'd been waiting for his whole life. To flee *now* would mean to give up on the *one thing* he'd always wanted and he wasn't *about* to let that happen.

He shot Clouddusk a silent plea of desperation, expecting some kind of reaction from the older male. He spotted the gray dragon's impassive expression and lack of antiphon, and his stomach did a flip-flop as he realized the implications of these actions. *He wants me to prove that I can do it on my own*, he realized. Immediately, doubt began to creep back in. He remembered all the *years* of warnings Clouddusk had given him. *Stay hidden. Never let them see*

*you. Never let them fear you.*

*He wants* me *to show them that I am here to help.*

Suddenly, the reasoning behind his mentor's former words seemed *much* more real and *very* useful. As in, he wished he'd listened to them *long* before now.

He heard a low growl emitting from the jungle dragon's throat but, before he had a chance to register what going to happen, the red hatchling was already on top of him, landing squarely on his shoulders and knocking them *both* to the dirt. Cloud howled in agony as the dragon's talons smashed against his spine. A burning pain erupted across his scales as he fell backward, landing hard on his wings. He could see the smoke rising from his body as the two hit the grass and tumbled toward the water. *That dragon burns anything he touches!* Cloud realized with a jolt of panic as jolts of pain rocketed through his bones and the back of his head collided with the mud. He struggled to stand back up, but heavy talons slammed down on either side of his face, and he froze, feeling the heat flowing from the hatchling's very being and hearing the snarl of victory.

"*Don't move,"* the hatchling hissed, his voice cold and dangerous, "or I'll turn you into *charcoal*."

"I-is it T-twisterheart?" came a timid and muffled accent from behind the rocks.

"It *has* to be," the yellow hatchling growled, narrowing his eyes and landing cautiously on the ground nearby, leaving the pink dragon hovering alone safely out of harm's way. "There have been no blue dragons on Dragnaple for *hundreds* of years!"

"Well, then he's invaded our dream," the red hatchling interrupted again, "and I'm going to *blast* him back *out* of it."

Cloud knew *that* wasn't going to end well. Somehow, he needed to *convince* them that he *wasn't* Twisterheart. And by the *look* of it, he was going to have to do it *quickly*, unless he desired to have lava permanently embedded in his scales, but *what* could he say? What

would they *believe*? He *was* blue. There was no doubt about that and he probably *did* look a bit like Twisterheart and it *certainly* didn't help matters that he was currently pinned underneath a volcano of a dragon who seemed second away from erupting. This was *already* not an ideal situation. Could it get any worse, *really?*

The grass underneath the dragonet's talons disintegrated as he leaned closer to Cloud's snout with a sneer. "Not so tough *now*, *are* we, Twisterheart? Looks like the stories about you were *wrong*." He opened his jaws wide and Cloud knew what would be coming next.

"I-I can't w-watch."

Agreeing with the little drake, Cloud slammed his eyes shut. *Clouddusk*! he screamed silently, *please* d*o something! I'm no good to anyone if I die!*

The heat inched closer and closer. He could feel the perspiration between his scales, but there was nothing he could do. He was pinned. He couldn't fight back. He was about to become mincemeat.

"That's *enough*." There was a flurry of movement and Clouddusk suddenly appeared, pushing his way between the two hatchlings, shooing the red dragon back, and glancing toward Cloud as the drake immediately started to roll back onto his paws. "Stand *down*," he snapped, whipping his head back to the approaching dragonets. "He's here to *help*."

"*What*?"

"H-huh?"

"You *must* be joking." The last comment came from the pink dragoness as she slowly lowered herself to the earth to join them, shouldering the desert dragon out of the way, earning a quiet hiss in protest. "He's a *blue* dragon!" she objected, pointing an accusing talon at him, as though it were somehow *his* fault he was that color. "He *can't* be one of us!"

Clouddusk ignored her. "Everyone; this is Cloud Star, the Defender of Sea."

Their outraged screeches could be heard echoing off the mountains.

"Clouddusk, you *can't* be serious!" the sand dragon yelped, his crystal eyes wide enough to be lakes.

"He's going to *kill* us!" the pink dragoness howled.

"Wait...i-is t-this r-*real*?" the green hatchling whispered, peaking around the boulders. His azure eyes sparkled with curiosity behind his spectacles. "A-are y-you *r-really* here t-to help?"

Cloud tilted his head toward him in acknowledgment. "I am."

He took a deep breath, shook out his wings, and tried to make himself look more presentable. He then lifted his gaze and scanned the three other hatchlings who'd come to gather around him uncertainly. He saw the fear in their eyes, but now he *also* saw hope and he could feel the pressure in his chest loosen. *This* was what he'd been waiting for. A *chance* to prove himself.

*Besides,* he hadn't snapped and tried to kill them in an inexplainable blind rage, so *that* was a pretty good plus in his book.

"Y-you're d-different," the smallest drake went on, taking another tiny step forward. He wrinkled his snout and adjusted his lenses as he averted his gaze to the grass and timidly went on. "Y-you don't s-seem l-like anything a-anyone's *e-ever* s-seen. L-like, y-you're not w-what...I-I mean, y-you're *not* g-going to k-kill us, *r-right*?"

"No," Cloud assured him, opening his wings in a non-threatening gesture and inclining his neck to the drake. "I come in peace."

The pink dragon *pffted*. "If we're going around judging dragons for their abnormalities, then you belong at the *top* of that list, *Minnow Grass*." Though she spoke with contempt, Cloud no longer heard terror in her words, or the words of the other hatchlings. His difference had been forgotten in mere moments. Perhaps that had partially been due to the many irregularities they had been bombarded with at once. He was *sure* they'd come back around to this conversation sooner or later.

Next time, he *would* be ready.

The dragon whirled around to face her. "I-it's *Meadow* Grass," he squeaked indignantly, his voice hitching at the last syllable.

She shrugged carelessly. "Are you *sure*? You seem more like a Minnow. Why don't you crawl back into whatever hole you've been hiding in for the past nineteen years, and leave the freeing the galaxy to the *real* heroes?"

The Watterlaek dragon looked as though he'd just been forced to swallow a dozen lemons. "I *am* a r-real hero!" he protested.

"Nah." The she-dragon rolled her eyes. "You're too *small* to be a real hero."

"*What?* Says w-who?"

"Says *me*."

Meadow tensed and narrowed his eyes. He opened his jaws to shoot a retort, but the yellow dragon cut him off with a snarl. "No!" he snapped, shooting them both warning glares. "No more *fighting*! There's *already* been enough of that tonight! We're supposed to be *Defenders*! *What* will our Realms think if we can't work together?"

Meadow and the red hatchling both looked at the ground shamefully. The pink she-dragon, *however*, glared back at him defiantly. "*My* Realm," she snarled, "will be pleased that I didn't get involved with any of you loony good-for-nothing lizards! My tribe taught me to fight *your* kind," she added, pointing a talon at the red dragon, "and to rely on *no one* except myself."

"Oh, *yeah*?" the red dragon hissed, not even bothering to turn around and address her head-on, "and how's *that* working for you, *Your Highness?*"

*Your Highness*? Cloud thought in alarm. *She's a* Queen*? She looks way too young!* The she-dragon looked *much* too youthful to have a kingdom of responsibility. She could *barely* be his age. How could she *possibly* be a queen?

The sand dragon seemed to have the same thought. "You're a *monarch?"* he yelped, fluttering away from her fearfully, eyeing her

as though he expected her to suddenly sprout a crown and set fire to his entire planet.

"Princess, *actually,"* she responded with a careless wave of her talons.

Meadow paled.

"So," Cloud questioned, the only one brave enough to speak, even as the other males began to back away, hissing curses underneath their breaths, "we address you by...?"

"My *name* is Princess Cotton Scale of Raynbowfalles," she growled, lashing her tail in the drake's face. "The eldest hatchling of Skydapple the Magnificent *and* heir to the throne."

*Yowch. Not got a thing for herself or anything, does she*? Cloud sighed and struggled to hold back an eyeroll. Five minutes in and he could *already* tell she was going to be trouble. Mentally, he added her to his list of dragons to watch. If her attitude didn't kill them, her *pride would.*

"And I suppose the royal's last name is Pain?" the red dragon grunted, just loud enough for Cloud to hear. He struggled to hold back a smirk as the pink dragon shot the hatchling a death glare. He lifted his wings innocently, earning an eye roll from the drake standing beside him.

"Wonderful," the yellow dragon growled sarcastically. "Anyone *else* have a royal family lineage that they would like to share while we're on the topic?"

"You don't get to speak to me in such a *disrespectful* tone!" the princess snapped. "I am to be the ruler of my world!"

*Not his though*, Cloud thought, noting his defiant glare.

The sand drake lifted his eyes towards the heavens as he trudged over toward Cloud. The blue hatchling was pleased to see that the fear was gone, replaced with curiosity and friendliness. *"Ignore* her," he advised. "Dragons like that don't often know what they've got going for them anyway. I'm Sun, by the way, and that *hulking* fiery

mass over there is Fire," he tilted his head toward the red dragon who responded with an uncomfortable smile. Then, lowering his voice, the desert hatchling added. "Don't let the fierce demeanor throw you. Under those skulking flaming scales of darkness and gloom, he's actually a big softy."

"I *heard* that!" Fire growled, but he was still grinning. Cloud was relieved to see the tightness had finally disappeared. It appeared he might potentially have friends here *after* all.

Sun, Fire, Meadow, and Cotton. Desert, Jungle, Watterlaek, and Raynbowfalles. Four *very* different worlds. Cloud's mind was spinning as he struggled to digest all the information he was receiving. How on was he supposed to convince them to work together? "Okay," he said, fighting to sound more authoritative. Flicking his tail, he unfolded a wing to shield Sun from a semi-threatening Fire. "I *think* we're supposed to be *listening* to Clouddusk and, I don't know about *you*, but I would *love* to hear how we are supposed to be able to stop Darkwhisperer."

*Especially if you can't,* he wanted to add, but he held his tongue, unsure where the rude thought had originated and certainly not about to blurt that out in front of everyone. They were already afraid *enough* as it was. He wasn't about to add the seed of doubt in the Raynbow drake as well.

"Y-yeah. M-me t-too," Meadow admitted, ducking under Fire's huge wings and pushing his way into the midst of the group.

"*Fine.* All right," Cotton growled. " Let's hear what the windbag has to say so we can all *wake up* and forget we ever laid eyes on one another."

Clouddusk glowered. "Very well. The five of you standing here are to be the newest Defenders of Dragnaple. You already *know* this. However, there is *so much* more to being a Defender than just getting superpowers and using them in whatever way you choose. A *Defender* is a dragon who is bold and strong but *also* one who cares about the well-being of innocents who cannot protect themselves. Your path will not be easy. *Each* of you must discover the power that resides within. Only *then* can you reach your true potential.

Only then can you be a real team. *Only then* will you truly be Dragnaple's Defenders."

"That's *it*?" Fire growled. "*That's* all you're going to give us? *How* do we unlock our powers? How do we even *begin*?"

"Yeah, it wasn't very informative," Sun agreed, giving the jungle male a side-glance. "Where do we get our *Idiot's Guide to Not Botching Everything*?"

"I-I don't think t-that e-exists," Meadow put in unhelpfully.

"If I told you *that*," Clouddusk countered, lifting his wings in an unrevealing shrug, his snout remaining stoic, "*where* would there be room for you to grow and learn? If I told you all the secrets of the galaxy, would you truly be content with what you find?"

Sun lowered his head. "I *guess* not," he mumbled.

Cloud smirked as Clouddusk's words sunk in. The gray dragon had that ability. He could twist anything said and turn it *back* against the speaker, transforming it into a lesson to make a hatchling think about their words. The Dream Realm knows he'd done it enough while raising Cloud and Coal (particularly since Coal had this irritating talent to argue at *everything* Clouddusk said).

"Okay, *fine*. So, you won't *give* us our powers," Cotton interrupted. "*Stupid,* but do we get *anything* from you?"

"And I *think* that's my cue."

At this, a dark shape slid out of the shadows. Cloud whipped around to see Coal standing there, clutching something gold and glittering in his talons. At the same time, all four hatchlings let out terrified screams and sprang backward. Fire and Sun arched their backs and spread their wings, looking ready to fight if it came down to that.

*What* was *it with these dragons?*

"It's D-Darkwhisperer!" Meadow yelped, his voice squeaking in terror. "W-what d-do we d-do?" He shrank behind Cotton who

looked briefly annoyed to have him *anywhere* near her but *just* as frightened of the black hatchling and in *no position* to do anything to fend him off.

"What we *came* here to do," Sun growled, pushing his way forward to take a defensive stance in front of the group. "We *take* him *down*."

"Sun!" Cloud shouted, sensing what the yellow hatchling was about to do. "*Wait* a minute! *Don't*--"

Ignoring Cloud's warning shouts, Sun lunged for Coal who did *not* look at *all* ready to defend himself as the jagged bundle of scales fell upon him. In seconds, Sun had him pinned to the earth with his talons at the Monterra hatchling's throat. The golden objects rolled out of Coal's claws and thumped to the grass a short distance away.

"*Whoa*. Fiery, *aren't* you?" Coal chuckled, not quite seeming to comprehend the situation. "*Nice* tackle. *Excellent* form. Your fear factor is *way* up there. However, you have a *serious* lack of communication with your teammates. For *instance,* if you had waited *just* another moment and *listened* to Cloud, you would have heard that I am *not* Darkwhisperer and I am *definitely not* here to destroy you."

"And *why* should we believe you?" Fire snarled. "You even *look* like one of those creatures!"

"I'm not," Coal responded calmly, flicking his cool gaze toward the red hatchling. "I come in peace, but I'm always up for a good old-fashioned tumble if you feel the need to let off a little extra...*steam*."

Cloud seriously doubted Coal would have *attacked* Fire, even if provoked, but he knew how important appearance was to the raven-scaled male. He wanted to come across as strong and competent and so did Cloud, though perhaps not *exactly* in the same manner of the word. "Sun," he spoke up after a moment, "it's *okay*. You can get off him now. He isn't Darkwhisperer. I'll vouch for him."

"*But,*" Sun began to protest, his gaze shooting from Coal to Cloud and back again. "I don't *think*—"

"*Off*," Cloud barked in what he thought was a *pretty* good attempt at a leaderish voice.

"All right, *all right*," Sun grumbled. "Don't get your scales all tied in a knot. I'm getting off of him." He stumbled backward and allowed Coal to roll to his feet. The black hatchling didn't seem too concerned about having been bowled over, which was fitting because Sun didn't look too apologetic about it either.

Cloud then turned his focus to Coal. "How did you know I'd be here?" he questioned. "You disappeared from the clearing right before I fell in the lake." He suppressed a shudder just remembering. Where had Coal gone in those moments before he was knocked in? Why hadn't he been there to help him?

"He's a *spy*!" Cotton snarled, baring her teeth and stomping forward.

Meadow yelped and scrambled after her, his talons visibly quivering underneath him.

Coal rolled his eyes. "Oh, for the love of tumbleweeds, how long must it take to get it through your *thick* skulls? *I am not the enemy*. I am here to *help* you!"

"*Help* us?" Cloud blinked. "*How*? You're not a Defender too, are you?" Though somewhere in the back of his mind, he slightly wished his brother had been chosen, he knew it wasn't possible. There were only *five* Defenders and there were *already* five hatchlings selected.

Coal shook his head. "No. Unfortunately, those slots have already been taken." He glanced up quickly at Clouddusk who gave him a small nod, "but I *have* been tasked as your team's personal bodyguard."

"Wait, *come* again there, mate?"

"B-bodyguard?"

Coal smirked at their confusion. He then fixed his gaze on Cloud. "I couldn't be a Defender like you," he explained, smiling sheepishly. "But I *still* wanted to come along. I couldn't let you have all the fun

*without* me. Clouddusk said I could go too if I went as a bodyguard. Pretty *great*, huh?" He spread his wings majestically and grinned with pride at the smaller drakes.

"Who *is* this sorry excuse for a dragon?" Cotton huffed. "And *why* is he invading our secret meeting?"

Coal dropped his wings. "And *you're welcome*," he sighed, smacking a talon to his snout in exasperation. "I *think* what you meant to say is, *'Oh thank you great and mighty warrior! We are eternally grateful that you have chosen to accompany us!'* Something like that. You know, just the *usual* respect."

"Yeah," Cotton snorted, rolling her eyes and stepping away, nearly whacking Meadow's nose with her tail as she did. "*Whatever* you say."

Brief annoyance crossed Coal's face but he didn't react as he turned back toward Clouddusk and squared his shoulders. "So, what *now*, boss?" he questioned. "How do I save the worlds?"

"*Excuse me*!" Cotton interjected again. "But *we* are in charge of saving the universe, *thank you very much!* Who asked *you* to butt in any way?"

"Really? I suppose you know how to use one of *these* then?" He scooped up the gold bracelet thingies and shoved them in her face.

"Oh!" Meadow piped up, hurrying over and snatching them out of Coal's grip excitedly. "I-I know h-how these w-work! I-It's s-simple r-really. M-measure the d-distance from the g-ground to the s-sky, d-divide it b-by l-longitude a-and l-latitude, and s-square the q-quotient." He fiddled as he spoke, twisting the device this way and that as though solving a super complicated Puzzle-cube.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Makes sense," Sun commented, nodding as the smallest hatchling spoke. He followed this up with a look towards Cloud that clearly said, '*please tell me you understood a word of what he just said'*.

Cloud shrugged, not having the faintest clue.

Coal *harrumphed*, looking a bit annoyed that another had been able to match his superior genius. "Fine then," he growled. "It's pretty clear that you don't need me here." He puffed out a billow of smoke. But it was all for show, Cloud knew. Inside, Coal was secretly pleased that he wasn't the only nerd in the group. "I guess I'll just see you all later." He turned and began to lumber off.

"No! Wait!" Sun called after him. "Stay! I *apologize* for Cotton's boorishness. We appreciate your assistance, and we could *really* use someone like you with us when we go to confront Darkwhisperer."

Coal paused and turned back toward the sand dragon with an amused smirk.

"What exactly *is* that anyway?" Cloud asked, drawing away from the uncomfortable conversation at hand, pointing instead to the heap of metal in Meadow's claws.

"It's a key to the Realm Portals," Coal explained. "It's how we're going to find each other outside of *this* place."

"T-this is r-real i-isn't it?" Meadow stammered, pausing his fiddling to look up at all of them. He probably did that a *lot*. "W-we're really d-doing t-this, aren't w-we?"

"Defenders," Violet interrupted. "May I have a word?"

They all turned back to her.

Cloud frowned as the she-dragon stood up abruptly and started toward them. She eyed the hatchlings, and, for a moment, Cloud thought he saw disappointment flash through her eyes. He blinked, but when he looked again it was gone. He wondered if he'd only imagined it.

Violet stopped when she was only feet away and gazed at each of them in turn, her eyes finally settling on Cotton as a frown curled onto her snout. Cotton frowned back at her. "You *all* have been selected for an important role as the protectors of the galaxy," Violet began. "This is a *crucial* role. Though it might not feel like it, the five of you are *far* from ordinary. You've been gifted with

extraordinary powers for *extraordinary* circumstances. But in order to win, you *must* work together as a team. I cannot stress the importance of this *enough*. Teamwork is the *key* to defeating Darkwhisperer *and* to the challenges between you and success. You're *all* different. Red. Green. Yellow. Pink. *Blue*." She glanced toward Cloud at this and gave him a ghost of a smile. "But when your hearts become one, then you will *truly* know what it means to be a Defender."

"YAWN," Cotton interrupted, opening her wings and giving them an impatient shake. "*Booorriiinnggg*! Let's just *goooo* already! *Some* of us have a life outside of this sob story, you know!"

Cloud glared at her. "*Hold* up," he interjected, holding up his foretalons to stop her. "We can't just *jump* into this without knowing what we're up against. We need to make a plan. There are steps that we *need to complete*. *First* off, where are we going to meet in the real world?"

"Good point," Sun agreed. "We can hardly just show up on the Realms heralding peace and love. That would mean death for *all* of us. *Him* especially." He gestured toward Cloud. "Besides, that's a lot of worlds to cover. What we *need* is somewhere discreet. Somewhere we *won't* attract attention."

"But *where*?" Fire demanded. "The Realms are still at war," he reminded them. "They'll see us coming from *worlds* away. Where could we be safe?"

Suddenly, a thought came to Cloud. He *knew* of a place where the different tribes could interact in peace. He'd *just* been there. "Flairforge!" he blurted.

The others turned to stare at him blankly.

"Pardon?" Sun said.

"Flairforge," Cloud repeated as Coal began to nod his understanding. "Well, *something* of a similar sort. A village here on Snowfalle where *all* breeds of dragons are welcome. Are there any of *those* left?"

Meadow shrugged. "N-not o-on Watterlaek."

Fire shook his head. "Starrlande either."

"There *might* be one on Marblerivver," Sun confessed, "but I couldn't tell you how to get there. And it's mostly home to bandits and rogues anyway."

All gazes now fell on Cotton, the only one who hadn't elected to voice her thoughts. "*What*?" she demanded, bristling at their expectant attention. "Do you *really* think Raynbowfalles has *anything* like that?"

"If *you're* any indication, then *definitely* not," Sun sneered.

"As a matter of fact," Coal interrupted, "unless I am mistaken, there *is* one. Skoutia."

Cotton blinked. "*What?"*

"Well, would you look at *that.* The Princess doesn't know everything *after* all," Fire sneered, earning a hard snicker from the others.

Cotton narrowed her eyes, looking like she wanted nothing more than to put him in his place. Then, she seemed to remember the fire-scales and immediately rethought that scenario. Fire smirked at this and innocently brushed a nearby bush, watching in amusement as Meadow let out a yelp and backpedaled when it erupted into flames.

Cloud ignored this as he turned his attention to Coal. "Skoutia. What is it?"

"It's a lot like Flairforge," Coal explained. "From what I've read about it, it can be found at the farthest north point on Raynbowfalles. Not many know of its existence and, those who do know only from rumors. At least that's what I've researched."

"Oh great," Cotton grumbled, "a bookworm. *Just* what we needed."

"Sounds like this place really sparks your interest," Sun observed, again ignoring the princess. "Do you have family there or

something?"

"I think my parents were from Raynbowfalles," Coal answered.

Cloud was surprised. From everything he knew about his friend, he'd guessed that Coal was a Monterra hatchling for sure. "Coal," he exclaimed. "I didn't know that!"

"I didn't tell you," Coal responded quickly, "because until recently, I wasn't even sure myself, but that's not what's important right now. What *is* important is how the four of you who *don't* belong on Raynbowfalles intend to get there unnoticed."

"T-that's a p-problem."

"Indeed," Sun grunted, seating himself beside the stream. "And it's one we'd better *do* something about before we go anywhere."

"I disguised Cloud once to sneak into Flairforge," Coal offered. "I think I could do it again. I'm sure I could find a way to sneak you all in." And then he looked at Fire. "Okay, except for him. He's just a bit too...hot."

"Well, then, I suggest you find some *other* way," Cotton's scales began to glow with an abnormal light as she stood up. "I'll be waiting for you all at the border. Don't be late. Until then, I must be going. Unlike *some* of you, *I* have a planet to rule." And, with that, she disappeared into a shower of light.

Cloud guessed this was what it looked like when dragons woke up from the Dream Realm. He glanced towards the others, finding that they too were staring at where the hatchling had been standing only moments before.

"I-is t-that it?" Meadow questioned. "C-can we g-go now?" He glanced over at Clouddusk expectantly. The gray dragon gave a slight nod.

The hatchlings looked at one another and, for a moment, silent agreement passed between them. This was a new path for all of them. It wasn't going to be easy, but it needed to be done. One by one, they all turned toward Cloud, giving him their undivided

attention. Although their first encounter had been all but stellar, they knew a leader when they saw one.

Cloud could only hope he could rise to meet their expectations.

"Let's...let's meet at the border in three days' time," he suggested. "And we can plan our next moves then. Sound good to everyone?"

Meadow and Coal nodded.

"Sounds good," Sun agreed.

"Will do," Fire grunted.

A rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance. All five hatchlings wheeled toward the sound in surprise and Clouddusk leaped from his podium to stalk the ground before them, tail lashing from side to side and ears alert.

"Uh... were we expecting anyone else?" Coal questioned.

An explosion suddenly rocked the clearing. Fire howled and tried desperately to find something to grab on to that wouldn't burst into flames, Meadow slammed his eyes shut and tried to melt into his surroundings, and Cloud and Sun backed away, hissing.

"*What's happening*?" Sun screamed, falling against a tree, eyes wide in terror.

"*Get out of here*!" Clouddusk bellowed, lunging forward and shoving the lot of them back from the heart of the clearing, flapping open his wings and pushing the drakes behind him.

"*What's* going on?" Coal questioned, stretching to peer around the gray dragon's large limbs.

"He's found us!" Clouddusk snapped. "Now *go*!" He lashed his tail, knocking the black hatchling back and bracing himself for an attack as the ground gave another uncharacteristic lurch.

Cloud didn't wait. "Come *on!"* he yelled at the others. He snapped his wings out and shoved the dragons toward the trees. "Move!

*Move*!" Coal took the lead, Fire and Sun hot in pursuit. Cloud whipped around to follow them...

...and realized that only *three* dragons were running.

"MEADOW!" he bellowed, twisting back toward the green hatchling just as a ball of fire came flying out of the trees. Cloud let out a yelp, diving toward the littlest dragon, throwing a wing over him and ducking as the flames whistled over their heads and exploded into the dark shadows behind them.

"CLOUDDUSK!"

A bloodcurdling scream rose from the blackness of the ravine. Clouddusk growled menacingly, taking a defensive step backward toward the hatchlings as a huge figure emerged from the shadows.

Cloud looked up. *Immediately,* he wished he hadn't. The new arrival was a midnight black dragon *twice* the size of Clouddusk with amber eyes that shone with fury. The drake gulped, feeling Meadow trembling underneath him. *This doesn't look good.*

"Uh, C-clouddusk? T-that's n-not who I t-*think* it is, i-*is* it?"

Clouddusk gave them a fearful glance; a desperate look of *run,* before turning back to face the newcomer head-on. He snarled, light already beginning to encompass his body as he moved forward to defend the hatchlings. The words spoken through clenched fangs sent chills dancing up the two drake's spines and confirmed their greatest fears.

There was no doubt about it. This was *him.*

*" Hello, Darkwhisperer ."*

# Chapter 8

*Darkwhisperer?*

Cloud felt fear bolt through him. That's *Darkwhisperer?* He was here? How had he found them already? *The lake.* His stomach clenched. The villain must have followed him. And Cloud had led him right to the others. *This is* my *fault!*

"Clouddusk," Darkwhisperer growled in a low, furious tone. "I always knew you were a sly one. But a new team of Defenders? That's low, even for you. And a bunch of *newborns* at that. Seems like you took me up on my offer."

"What offer?" Cloud demanded. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Clouddusk snarled. "Star, take Meadow. Get out of here. *Run.*" His gaze never wavered.

Cloud wanted to argue further, but one panicked look from Meadow was enough to persuade him otherwise. "Come on," he called, scrambling up and uncovering Meadow so he could do the same. "Let's go!" They turned to run, but Darkwhisperer had other plans.

"*Not so fast.*"

There was a crack of lightning and, suddenly, a wall of fire erupted before them, cutting off their hasty retreat. Meadow yelled and back-peddled into Cloud who struggled to think past the panic that was settling into his aching head. "Back!" he hollered. "Go the other way!" They whipped around and started to move. In an instant, the fire was upon them from every side, closing the circle and locking them inside.

"*Defenders.*"

The word was spat like dirt. Cloud squinted, struggling to see past

the flames. He heard a roar and a thump and he instinctively moved to shield Meadow as a figure moved into the fire. A low growl rumbled from the black dragon's throat as he appeared before them, a wicked grin etched on his face.

"W-what d-do you w-want?" Meadow squeaked.

Cloud could feel the hatchling quivering beside him even as his own legs were beginning to shake. He forced himself to look up at the hulking mass standing over them. He had never felt so afraid as he did now. This was *him*. This dragon was the reason the team had been formed. And, in less than an hour, they'd already been pitted against one of the most powerful snakes to ever walk the face of Dragnaple.

"So this is what Clouddusk sends me," Darkwhisperer went on as though he hadn't even heard Meadow. "A blue dragon...and a deformed wannabe." His eyes settled on Meadow and he snapped open his jaws. Cloud could see the familiar orange glow. He was getting ready to blast them.

"LOOK OUT!" he yelled to Meadow, grabbing him and yanking him out of the way. The fire whooshed over their heads and exploded into a group of trees behind them. Releasing the hatchling, Cloud whipped back around on all fours to face Darkwhisperer with a growl. "Get away from him!" he snarled, moving forward to block Meadow and take the brunt of any attack the dragon might use.

Darkwhisperer let out a war cry and lunged at Cloud. The blue dragon knocked Meadow out of the way and threw himself to the ground. Darkwhisperer missed and he landed gracefully behind them. Meadow yelped in terror and backed as close to the flames as he dared. But it didn't seem to matter. Darkwhisperer's focus was solely on Cloud now. The two squared off and, as they did, Cloud sized up his opponent. Darkwhisperer was about twice his mass. His wings and talons were as thick as an oak tree and his teeth were sharper than spears.

Cloud suddenly felt undersized in so many ways.

Darkwhisperer snapped his jaws open and made a strange hissing

sound. It was a noise unfamiliar to Cloud, but before he could begin to guess what it was, black lightning erupted from the dragon's mouth and drove into Cloud's chest, sending the hatchling reeling backward to the ground with a hard crash. Pain burst in his nerves and he gasped, struggling to find the strength to stand. He heard wing-beats and felt a warm breath in his ear as heavy talons slammed against his neck, pinning him to the earth. Cloud yelped in terror and thrashed wildly, trying to break free, even as the pressure increased. *I'm gonna die!* he screamed internally. He whimpered helplessly and closed his eyes, submitting to his fate.

"You're not a Defender," Darkwhisperer sneered. "You're not even a hero. I *look forward* to killing you." The weight against his throat lessened and then was gone entirely.

Cloud fought the urge to lie still, forcing his screaming muscles to obey as he carefully drug himself to his feet, ready to keep fighting. But, as he turned to face the black dragon, he found that Darkwhisperer had vanished.

Not questioning why, he dropped onto one knee in relief, exhaling slowly and grimacing at the pain.

"C-cloud!"

Meadow's voice. Blinking, Cloud glanced up to see the hatchling hurrying toward him, eyes wide and fearful behind his lenses. "Cloud," he repeated, reaching his side and following his gaze to stare at where Darkwhisperer had been standing only moments before. "Are you a-all right?"

"Fine," Cloud lied.

"I'm s-sorry," Meadow went on apologetically. "H-he was j-just s-so *big* and I-I just f-froze. I-I don't have w-what it t-takes to be a Defender."

"No," Cloud interrupted. "This wasn't your fault. You didn't bring Darkwhisperer here."

"B-but I d-did," Meadow argued. "I...I did."

*What is he talking about?* Cloud opened his mouth to ask what he meant but was interrupted by heavy footsteps. He looked up, breathing a sigh of relief as the ring of fire vanished and Clouddusk stood there, weak, but overall, all right.

"Are you both all right?" the gray dragon demanded.

They nodded. Clouddusk looked relieved at these words. He let down his guard and slumped against a tree. "This is all my fault," he growled. "I should never have risked a Dream Jump. Of course he found us. I led him right to us."

*Clouddusk did?* Cloud didn't understand. "But how could you have--"he began.

"It doesn't matter how," Clouddusk growled. "What matters now is how he's tracking the five of you. It's not safe for you to come here anymore. Any of you. If he's using my dreams to connect to you, then it'll be safer if you stay away."

Cloud frowned. "What are you saying?"

Clouddusk looked right at him. "I'm *saying* there's nothing more I can do for you. From now on, the five of you are on your own." He turned away, his body already beginning to pulse with a familiar white light. Cloud had no time to yelp out a protest before the whiteness enveloped everything and the Dream Realm was gone.

He awoke back in his cave with a gasp.

Spluttering, he rolled over and coughed up an ocean of water. He felt like he was full of nothing but liquid. He wheezed, inhaling air as though it was a rare treat. He felt as though he'd sucked in all of Bluerim Lake and was beginning to feel worse for the wear. His body felt like it had been thrown into a volcano and then promptly overlaid with frostbite. Everything ached.

"Cloud? Cloud? You okay?" Talons clattered near his head and he felt a wing rest on his shoulders as he gagged and spluttered. He managed a weak nod before coughing up a fish. A live one. "Man, pal, I've heard of drinking your own weight but this is just

ridiculous!"

Cloud opened his jaws to shoot some kind of smart remark but was cut off abruptly by another wave of nausea and pond water. Coal wrinkled his snout in disgust and took a step back. Cloud heaved again and then, through watery eyes, asked, "W-what happened?"

Coal frowned. "You fell in the lake."

*Yeah, I* know *that. I was* pushed. Cloud shook his head. "No, after that," he croaked. "While I was in the Dream Realm."

Coal sighed. "I pulled you out of the water, Cloud. You weren't breathing. I heard you fall in but I couldn't get to you any faster. Not with those Shades around. When I did, I instantly started every breathing procedure Clouddusk had taught us. I was afraid I was too late, especially after I was dream-jumped and found myself in the Dream Realm with special instructions. And you know the rest."

"Someone hit me in the head," Cloud growled. "Do you know who?"

Coal shook his head. "I didn't see anyone."

*If no one else was there*, came an ominous voice from the very back of his mind, *then where did he go*? Cloud quickly shook away those webs of doubt. Even if the dream had been a vision, Coal wasn't a murderer. *But he knows I can't swim*.

"So what do we do now?"

Cloud blinked. "What?"

"You're a Defender now," Coal reminded him, seeming unaware that Cloud had entirely zoned out. "We're supposed to meet up with the others in three days."

*The others. The meeting. Darkwhisperer.* "Coal," he began. "Do you remember what happened? When everyone fled?" *And Meadow didn't*. Images of the small green hatchling flashed through his mind. The petrified fear on his face. *These new Defenders are still hatchlings. They don't know what they're up against.*

Coal shrugged. "Honestly, no. I was running too fast. I know you weren't there though. Where'd you go?"

"I didn't make it," Cloud explained. "Darkwhisperer." He gestured to the huge bruise that had formed on his chest." He trapped Meadow Grass and me. Clouddusk tried to fight him off but he was no match. I..." he swallowed hard, recalling the moment, "I tried to face him. He overpowered me. And then he said he looked forward to killing me."

"And then?"

Cloud shrugged. "And then he was gone. Just like that."

"Gone? Just...*gone*?"

Cloud nodded.

"No explanation? No...nothing? *Gone*?"

"Gone."

Coal shuddered from the tips of his wings to the end of his tail. "That's...*unnerving*."

Cloud nodded. He finally found the strength to stand up and he leaned against the cave wall. The events of the night were still fresh in his mind. But, for now, he pushed them to the back of his head. Other more pressing matters needed his attention.

"We need to get to Raynbowfalles," Cloud remembered. "So how do we do that?"

Coal sighed. "The only way would be to find the Realm Portal," he explained. "Which we both know is almost impossible."

"Well, we're supposed to meet the others in three days," Cloud commented. "So you'd better get to work."

Coal's ears flicked back in surprise. "*Me*? Why me? What are you going to be doing while I'm doing all the work? Stuffing yourself full of fish?"

Cloud smiled wryly. "One, I don't think I ever want to see another fish. Living or otherwise. Two, no, I'm going back to the lake. Maybe there's something there that can help us figure this out."

"Like what?"

"I don't know now. But there's got to be something, right? Isn't there always?" With that, Cloud turned and lumbered off, leaving his brother standing there, watching his retreating back.

"Brilliant," he heard Coal mumble. "Great forethought there."

Cloud ignored the sarcasm as he padded towards the exit. A million thoughts raced through his brain. They were all a bit overwhelming. Did Darkwhisperer know where he was? Where they lived? How much did he know? Was he coming for them that very moment? It wasn't impossible. The Shades were already there. How long did they have before the Realm was entirely overrun? And what about the others? Were they safe? Did Darkwhisperer send Shades after them too? How many Realms had already been destroyed?

He'd been a Defender for less than twelve hours! Had he already lost *four* Realms?

*No!* He shoved the thought as far away from his mind as possible. *Darkwhisperer is smart. He wouldn't risk full-blown rebellion right away. He seems more like the charming type, getting the Realms to trust him before obliterating everything.*

So why had his tactics changed when he'd met the Defenders? Why not try and convince them to join him instead of threatening to kill them right off?

He didn't know the answer. With a sigh, he shook his wings out, diverting his attention from his own worrisome thoughts to the quiet forest surrounding him. The trees stood ominously still, almost as though petrified. The birds that normally would litter the treetops were absent. *Do they know something's wrong? Can they sense it?*

Cloud gulped and, lowering his head, picked up his pace. As he neared the lake, he felt his pulse begin to quicken and the ocean of memories come flooding back. The water...drowning...the weight of the heavy talons against his neck...He shuddered and tried desperately to push them to the back of his mind. It was over. Whoever the dragon was, he was gone. Coal had chased him off. *Was it Darkwhisperer himself? Or just one of his minions?* He sighed deeply. Somehow, he guessed, if it had been Darkwhisperer, Coal would never have survived. But, then again, the Shades weren't *that* much of an improvement. *How could he have defeated them alone?*

He paused, hearing the gentle lapping of the lake against his sensitive ears. He swallowed hard, shoving away all his panicked and fleeting thoughts. He had to push past his fears. *Especially* if he wanted to figure out what was going on.

He arrived a few moments later. His eyes immediately began to scan the dense shrubbery as his brain attempted to piece together the order of events. He noticed a few broken and otherwise twisted plants. They seemed to have been trampled by several pairs of talons. Curious, he placed his talon down on one of the prints. *Great stars! Those dragons must have been at least seventeen feet tall!* He shuddered. He'd never heard of dragons of such stature. He felt his heart thudding harder now.

Cautiously, he moved further into the underbrush, following the trail of ruined vegetation until the footprints ended. He stopped there to collect his bearings. He knew the layout of the surrounding area. Up ahead was a large meadow, and beyond that was the village. Coal wouldn't have continued in that direction and risk leading the Shades to the citizens. *He must have gone the other way.*

With that thought in mind, he turned left abruptly. As he walked, his mind began sorting through the mental image of the path before him. Two hops to the left was a ravine. To the right, a winding creek. Up ahead, the trees thinned and warm sunshine poured in through the leafy canopy. He turned and sighed deeply, eyeing the darkening trees. Coal couldn't have gone that way. He was too big. He would never have fit.

That left the creek.

Loosening his wings with a small shake, he trotted toward the sound of running water. The trail had gone cold. Wherever Coal had led the Shades, they must have taken to the sky, for their footprints were gone. For some reason, that thought was not very settling.

He spotted the creek a little way off of the path and plodded over to it, taking a seat between a cluster of boulders and dipping his fore-claws into the water, instantly feeling his weariness wash away. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, honing in on the distant sounds of voices coming from the village, and the flutter of birds in the treetops.

As he exhaled, he felt the water slide over his talons and begin to inch up his legs. He winced slightly but didn't move. He tried to ignore the flashbacks of what had happened the last time. He was the Defender of the Sea. He *had* to keep trying. *Breathe,* he told himself. *Just breathe. Focus. Control it.*

Cautiously, he opened one eye. The water continued to spiral up his forelegs. He saw this and couldn't keep the small smile off of his face. *I'm doing it! I'm moving water!*

"CLOUD!"

His head shot up at Coal's loud bellow. And, just like that, his concentration was broken. The water fell back into the stream with a loud splash just as the black hatchling dropped into the clearing with a graceful swoop. Swallowing back his disappointment, Cloud turned toward his friend. "Coal? What is it?"

"I think I found it!" Coal answered, bounding over.

"'It'?" Cloud tipped his head, a bit confused.

"The Realm Gate!" Coal slung a wing around his shoulders and began to drag him toward the caverns. "I know where it is!"

"Really? Where?" *That was fast.*

"It's at the top of Mount Tipicana!" Coal answered as they reached the caves and he headed toward his room. Cloud waited as his brother disappeared inside for a moment. "We've got to get ready!"

There was a flash of color and several articles of clothing came flying from the room, including a traveler's cloak and a scarf. Cloud ducked as a pair of earmuffs nearly bonked him in the nose.

"Ready?" Cloud echoed. "Coal, is all of...this," He gestured to the clothing with a wing, "*necessary*?"

Coal stuck his head around a bend. "What do you mean?" he questioned, frowning. Cloud almost laughed at his appearance. The dark earmuffs made his ears seem larger and even more bat-like than usual and the bright orange scarf that was wrapped so delicately around his neck was eyeball-scorching.

Cloud rolled his eyes. "Never mind," he responded. "But I am *not* wearing any of that." He pointed to the pair of bold yellow ear socks. "*Especially* those."

Coal shrugged as if he didn't care. "Suit yourself," he said, chuckling as he slid past Cloud and started back down the hall. "Just don't blame me when you arrive on Raynbowfalles with frostbite."

Cloud scoffed at this. "Frostbite?" he called, turning and following the black hatchling. "Why on Dragnaple would I get frostbite?"

"Um...because we're going to the very top of the mountain?" Coal replied, flicking his tail toward the old map hanging from the walls. A stick had been jabbed into the peak, where Cloud guessed Coal had marked the location of the Realm Portal. "And what does it tend to do at the top of a mountain?"

Cloud felt like he was the subject of an interrogation. "Er...snow?"

"*Exactly*."

Cloud grunted and followed his friend in unnerving silence. They rounded a bend and started down the hall toward Cloud's cave. The lapping of water grew louder as they neared the underground river. "All right, fine. I'll bite. Why the top?"

Coal shrugged. "I guess it wasn't supposed to be easy to find," he replied. "Now," he added with a playful nudge in the shoulder. "Go suit up. I'll grab some last-minute things and meet you back here,

okay?" He didn't wait for a response and slid away into the darkness before Cloud could protest.

Cloud huffed tiredly and trudged toward his room. All the way, he could only think about the faces of his team as they swirled through his brain. A stuck-up princess, a highly trained assassin, a scrawny hybrid, and a hatchling afraid of his own talons. He didn't know what Clouddusk had been thinking, making him the leader. He wasn't strong, smart, or anything else a leader was supposed to be.

He was just...Cloud.

But, somehow, he felt he was going to have to rise to the challenge. No matter his internal doubts, worries, and sheer panic, the team...no, the *universe*...was relying on him to save them. There was no one else. He'd been chosen. For whatever reason, he was a Defender. The Defender of Sea. Their *captain*.

He just hoped, when the time came, he could be enough.

# Chapter 9

The plan was simple. Wait for the cover of night and slip through the city undetected. It seemed easy enough. No one would see them, they would travel virtually invisible, and Cloud wouldn't have to wear the ridiculous hooded cape. A win-win for all parties involved.

They flew throughout the evening, Cloud preferring to stay high in the clouds where he couldn't be spotted, while Coal engaged in complicated loops over, around, and about the villages, making no effort to conceal his identity, or his bubbling enthusiasm. His only reward was an occasional eye roll from a passing grave-shift worker or an irritated huff from an elder out for a midnight stroll. He wasn't deterred, however, and Cloud still had to deal with his excitement whenever he decided to pop up for a visit.

"*Cloud*!" the squeal of excitement was almost as obnoxious as the scarf and Cloud couldn't help grimacing at the loud discord. "Look what I found! Mittens! *Mittens*! Who *knew* they made mittens for dragons? Amazing!" He seemed in heaven.

Cloud merely snorted and focused his gaze once more on the sky before him. In the distance, the snowy peaks of the range came into view. After a glance toward the glowing moons, he estimated they were about three hours away from home (meaning the village below them was Coteria and not Flairforge), and about seven hours from the Realm Portal. At the rate Coal was going, however, they'd be lucky to make Raynbowfalles by *next year*.

"Cloud?" Coal flicked an ear in concern, noticing his friend's silence. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Cloud answered automatically. It was a lie. He swallowed, still struggling to wrap his head around everything. Out of literally thousands of dragons-*non-blue* dragons-he'd been chosen. He simply didn't understand. "Why me?" he inquired in a softer tone. When Coal looked confused, he went on. "There are so many

other dragons, so why would Clouddusk choose me? I mean-what about *you*?" He hesitated, afraid that he might offend him.

Fortunately, Coal didn't seem too upset by this remark. "You mean, why am I not a Defender too?"

Cloud nodded sheepishly.

Coal shrugged. "Don't know. Just wasn't to be, I suppose. Besides, there was nothing in the prophecy about a handsomely dark and charming hatchling, so I guess they just lucked out." With that, he put on a burst of speed and shot forward, exploding several poofy clouds in his haste.

His words swam around in Cloud's head...and then it clicked. "Wait...*what* prophecy?"

"'What prophecy?' '*What prophecy?*' CLOUD!" His shriek was almost enough to startle Cloud from the air. "HOW CAN YOU NOT KNOW ABOUT THE PROPHECY?!"

"Uh...I just...*don't*?" Cloud offered, though it was a weak excuse. He pumped his wings harder to close the distance between himself and Coal. "Could you...maybe enlighten me?"

Coal snorted. "I'm starting to get the impression that the only reason I'm here is to make sure you are fully educated in Defender history."

"Well, you seem to be very knowledgable in that department," Cloud obliged.

Coal rolled his eyes, but Cloud noticed a faint smile and that made him feel just a little bit better. "All right. So what's the plan for when we get to Raynbowfalles? Our arrival is certain to draw attention. And, unless I'm mistaken, that's kind of the last thing we want right now. We'll need a quick getaway."

"You're right," Cloud agreed. "But I don't know the layout of the Realm. Did Clouddusk ever dream-jump you there?" He quickly shoved the bristles of jealousy out of his brain at the thought of Clouddusk favoring Coal in *any way*, even with something so small. Clouddusk would *never* do that. And besides, what was there to be

jealous over? It wasn't like Cloud *actually cared* about seeing another hatchling's dream. But, still...

"No," Coal admitted. "That was something he refused, even to me." He shrugged and it was clear that he wasn't bothered about it, unlike Cloud. "However," he went on. "I did some research on what I could find about the terrain." He cleared his throat as though he were a professor beginning a lecture. "The climate of Raynbowfalls is a sub-tropical environment, abundant in many types of fauna and flora, and--"

"And for those of us who don't spend hours memorizing chapters of text scrolls?" Cloud interjected, wary of where this conversation would lead.

"It's a prairie."

"A prairie?"

"Yes. A prairie. *Just* a prairie." Coal puffed out a billow of irritated smoke. "Now, come on," he added, as a distant rumble of thunder drew Cloud's attention toward the horizon. "If we hurry, we can reach the base of the mountain before that storm reaches *us*."

And just like that, the conversation was over.

It would be a few minutes longer before Cloud realized Coal hadn't told him *anything* about the prophecy.

They flew in silence for a while. Coal, apparently growing bored with the quiet, went back to pestering every villager or merchant he passed. Cloud kept mostly to himself, wallowing in his self-pity and doubt. Twice he almost drifted off, only to be awoken by the flaming glare of Darkwhisperer haunting his dreams and watching as the realms burned to ashes. Coal claimed to have caught him right before he fell out of the air. After the third bout of that, Cloud decided they needed to stop for a breather before he took a plummet that Coal couldn't catch.

He could barely restrain his sigh of relief when the storm broke and Coal suggested they land for the evening. Cloud exhaled and just

nodded, following him toward a small hollow. He was grateful to see a small pond. A pond equaled water, and maybe fish. His stomach rumbled at the thought. *It has to be almost dinner time by now*, he reasoned. Actually, several hours *past* dinner time.

A flash of lightning illuminated the hollow as they touched down and Coal immediately shuffled toward a cluster of pine trees to avoid the downpour. Cloud blinked, unfazed by the water rolling off of his snout and talons, and surveyed the clearing warily. It was getting late, they had no idea where they were, they were *dangerously* close to a village, and he did not particularly feel like getting attacked by spears and daggers in the middle of the night when all he wanted to be doing was sleeping.

*Must be nice*, he mused, with a sidelong look at Coal, *to be able to live without fear of assassination at every turn.* He felt the pang in his heart once more, the yearning to be normal, or at least to be accepted. The looks the other Defenders had given him...he *never* wanted another dragon to stare at him like that.

*But I'm not normal*, he reminded himself harshly. *I'm blue. I'm always going to be different.* But, perhaps that wasn't such a bad thing. Maybe he could use that to show the rest of the galaxy that scale-color wasn't important. That it was the substance of the heart that defined a dragon, not how he looked on the outside.

Maybe one day, that could be him. After he found Darkwhisperer and saved the galaxy. He could be a hero for his scales, not feared because of his differences. It was a hopeful dream, but one he was willing to pursue.

"Coal?"

"Hmmm?" the hatchling hummed, revealing he was almost asleep.

Cloud glanced down at his talons and hesitated before going on. "Am I really good enough to be the Defender of the Sea? What if I *am*...evil?" The word tasted horrid on his tongue.

"You're not."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because...the prophecy would never have chosen you if you were." Coal shifted in his pile of leaves, every movement filling the clearing with the crackling and crunching. "A single heir of thunder and night," he went on in a murmur, as though reciting from his dreams. "On...on wings of power shall make his flight."

*Heir...thunder and night...power...flight...* The words swam through Cloud's brain. He frowned and turned to fully face his friend to question him more, only to hear gentle snoring instead.

Cloud sighed and padded over, curling up under a tree and tucking his talons up to his chest. The rain continued to fall, but the branches blocked him from the most of it. He closed his eyes and gave his ears a tired flick. *It will be all right*, he told himself. *We'll get to Raynbowfalles tomorrow and meet up with the others. Then we'll come up with a plan to defeat Darkwhisperer. It'll all work out in the end.*

He fell asleep to the steady rise and fall of Coal's breaths. His dreams were empty and he didn't wake again until well after sunrise the following morning.

They flew for a good part of the next day. Coal, no longer having any travelers to bother, had been forced to fly alongside Cloud and irritate the living daylights out of *him*. Cloud eventually surrendered and flew in silence, listening to his friend's rambling as they passed over a pine forest and several streams. The terrain was not the only thing that changed. He was also acutely aware of the air becoming progressively colder the closer they flew to the mountains. As they landed for a small break at the foot of the ridge, he noticed a few snowflakes around his wings.

Coal promptly went to investigate a small stream and Cloud remained to stretch his wings. He yawned and glanced up at the lingering sun. Had he not known the truth about the danger that the galaxy was in, and had he been any *normal* dragon, he'd have said it was almost a perfect day.

But he wasn't an ordinary dragon, and the galaxy could be

destroyed at any moment. He had to stay alert. The shadows that had attacked the town could have followed them, he reasoned. They could be walking straight into a trap. *Stop. Don't think like that*, he ordered himself as he tossed his head and started after Coal.

The black hatchling was pretty easy to spot, darting in and out of the trees, laughing as he frightened a murder of crows from the branches. Cloud chuckled, taking a mental picture of Coal dangling by his tail, grinning toothily at him. "All right, come on," he laughed, waving his friend over with a wing. "We've got a mountain to climb, don't forget."

Coal bounded over with an overly-cheery expression. "Right! Yes, this way!" With that, he started toward the first rocks.

They climbed steadily upward for a while. All the way, Coal chattered on about the missions of the Winged Five. Cloud listened, intrigued, as he followed. After all he'd seen in the past few days, he would take any information that he could get, even if only half of the facts were accurate.

"Did you know that Darkwhisperer was the original leader of the Winged Five?" Coal questioned as he leaped over a low crevice and turned, waiting as Cloud followed suit, scrabbling to gain a grip on the uneven rocky surface. Once he was safely across, Coal continued, folding his wings close to his body as he slid along the narrow ledge.

"He *was*?" Cloud gasped. "I don't remember that. What happened?"

"He got too ambitious," Coal answered. "Wanted to use his powers for his own gain. Watch your step here, it's a bit slippery."

"So...what did Clouddusk and the others do?" Cloud slowed as he reached the ledge and used his wings and tail for balance.

"They stopped him," Coal sighed and rolled his eyes slightly. "*Obviously*."

Cloud thought he heard a twinge of bitterness in the hatchling's tone. *He's probably tired of me asking all these obvious questions*, he

reasoned. True, he hadn't spent a lot of time studying the scrolls, but, to be fair, he hadn't had any *reason* to believe the stories until then. "How?" he went on.

Coal shuddered. "I'd rather not talk about it."

Cloud shrugged, deciding not to push. He simply closed his jaws and trudged on.

Four hours later, Cloud had officially decided-he *hated* mountains. His claws ached from all of the stone slabs and his wings felt like they were going to fall off from the insistent wind that had been battering him since the very start; trying to blow him off the face of the cliff. He was tired, sore, and extremely thirsty.

And now, as he stared over the edge at a looming drop that would mean certain death, he was once again questioning why he had even agreed to come on this journey to begin with. He had no strength, or leadership qualities, or anything that could define him as a hero. That was for a dragon that was respected...a dragon that others could look up to... a powerful leader...

Certainly not *him*!

But yet; if he was not supposed to be all of those things, why would Clouddusk have said differently? And why would Coal agree with him? Was it possible that this *was* who he was supposed to be? Did his mentor see all of these things in him? Could he really be what the Realms needed to save them?

*But what do I have that others don't? Is it my magic or something else that I don't even know about? Do I have something different in me that only four other dragons in the entire universe have?* Then, the more important question came to him. *If I do; then what is it?*

He shook his head warily. He didn't know. And at the rate that Clouddusk was telling him; he'd find it out too late to do anything about it. Besides, what he needed to be focusing on right now was finishing his long hike up the side of the mountain. He looked up longingly at the peak that was still a good distance off-but at least he could now see the flickering golden glow from the portal.

Ignoring his complaining muscles, he heaved himself forward onto a large boulder that had been flattened by the wind and the rain to a point where it was nearly smooth. His ears were forced back on his skull by the gusts of wind and he grabbed the rock tightly with his talons, shivering. This was *seriously* not his type of weather. He had felt snow in the air all morning and now, just as the sun was reaching its peak; he saw the first flakes begin to fall. *Great...just what I wanted. Something else to slow me down.* He raised his eyes to the heavens in disbelief.

Then, out of nowhere, a few pebbles dropped from the sky and landed at his feet. *That's strange*, he thought. *Stones don't just fall from the sky, do they*? He glanced around, expecting to find Coal grinning down at him from somewhere up head, amused with his prank, but the black hatchling was nowhere to be found.

"Coal?" His voice echoed off of the cliffs, but there was no response from the hatchling.

He snapped his gaze to a nearby ledge and nearly let out a screech as he came face to face with a dark dragon with brilliant purple eyes...and very white fangs. "Whoa!" he gasped, scrambling backward. "What *are* you?" It wasn't a mortal dragon, he could tell that just by glancing at its scales which seemed to be moving like air.

The creature opened its mouth in silent mockery, its eyes glowing brighter as it stared him down. Even if it was only about half of his size, he could feel the power behind the reptile's form. He noticed the dragon's very long-and very red-claws and swallowed hard. The creature stared at him as if stalking its prey. He hated the way it was looking at him.

A voice rose from the wind; piercing Cloud's heart, causing every part of his body to go ridged. "*DESTROY HIM*!"

Cloud did not even have time to yelp out a cry before the creature had thrown itself off of the side of the ledge and rammed into his side, sending him toppling to the ground. He whipped his tail around at the dragon-only for his tail to pass right through the animal's head. He stared, wide-eyed, as the realization struck him

and the dragon stood over him, cackling.

He rolled back to his feet, fending off the attacking dragon the best he could with his wings. "Get away from me!" he shouted, lashing out with his hind legs which did no damage to the creature. He ducked under a powerful blow aimed for his head and cringed back when the creature spat at him. He tried to take a step backward to get out of the dragon's face, but his foot met thin air and he quickly scrambled back onto the ledge.

The dragon seemed to sneer at him and then, before Cloud could do anything to prevent it, it slammed into him, throwing him clear off of the cliff, sending him plunging straight down toward the earth. The world spiraled around him, spinning out of control. He tried to scream, but it was lost in the wind. His body was frozen, he couldn't move, he couldn't stop spinning.

He was just yards from hitting the very hard ground.

A hundred feet from the earth, he felt his wings loosen up and he frantically threw them open, The wind caught under them and threw him back into the air. Screams of fury echoed off the face of the cliff and there was a streak of black across a clear sky as the dragon dove at him. He turned to face it, catching it as it hurtled towards the ground, and, using one of the techniques he'd read about in his scrolls, used its momentum to throw it away from him. *Hard.*

A moment later, the creature righted itself and flew at him again, black fire bursting from its jaws. The fire struck Cloud and the blue dragon was just able to keep hovering as the pain ripped through him like a tornado.

Suddenly, the pain changed. It was like all of the anger and fury that Cloud could hold slipped its way down to his claws, which lit up with light blue stripes, and, before he could think about it, he swung around. Then, without warning, *water* burst from his talons. It flew through the air and hit the dragon who screeched as its scales began to glow and a moment later...it exploded.

Cloud hovered there for a moment, stunned. All of the anger died

and his tail returned to its normal appearance. *What in Dragnaple just* happened? But somehow; he already knew the answer. He was a Defender-Clouddusk's Defender-and that meant he could do more with the water. This was his power.

*This* was the power of the sea.

"Coal?" he roared again, slowly working his way back to the ledge, wincing at the pain in his wings and talons as he dropped himself onto the rock and pressed his back against the cliff. He breathed in and out hard, hearing the sharp rasping coming from his lungs. "*Coal?*" he gasped, eyes drifting around the clearing frantically.

"Cloud!"

*There*! He heard him! Cloud's headshot around as he recognized wingbeats and spotted Coal struggling toward him, his ears flattened against the wind in terror. "Coal!" Cloud wheezed, staggering to his feet and letting out a sigh of relief. "You're all right!"

"Just barely!" Coal growled unhappily. "I just got chased half-way around a mountain by one of those Shades! I think they know where the Realm Portal is and--" He paused his rant to stare at Cloud. "*You're hurt*!" he added with a cry of alarm.

Cloud shook his head blearily. "I'm fine," he lied. He winced at the protesting stings and gritted his teeth as he forced his wings to his sides. "Are you?"

Coal nodded, still wide-eyed. "I'm all right. We'd better go. Darkwhisperer can't be too far behind his goons."

And he was telling the truth. Looking him up and down, Cloud couldn't find a single bruise on him. He opened his mouth to inquire whether Coal had seen where the other Shade had gone, but the black hatchling was already scrabbling up a nearby crag. His entire body was trembling, but he kept going. Biting back his hisses of pain, Cloud started after him.

The second half of the climb was more treacherous than the first,

and for much of the trip, Cloud was dangling on a two-foot overhang, trying his best not to fall. He had reached the point where the wind was too strong for him to glide. If he were to jump into the wind, it would immediately throw him back into the cliffside. No, for this leg of his journey, he was going to have to go on foot. It had been two hours since the ambush and now Cloud found himself limping as he walked-or, more accurately, *slid*--over patches of ice or snow. But now he was only a short distance away from the portal and he could see the swirling lights and colors.

*This is it,* he thought. He glanced back down the way he'd come before clambering over the last few boulders to the small cave where the portal was hovering. He felt his breath being taken away as he stared at it. It was so *weird* looking! He had expected something simple, but instead, he saw a complex orb with many different colors swimming around in it and he felt a little dizzy just watching.

*No turning back now*.

"*Whoa*," Coal gasped as he finished his one final loop around the ledge and came to stand beside him. "*That's* it?"

Cloud inhaled deeply, staring at the portal, feeling hesitation lock his legs into place. "I'm not so sure about this," he said aloud.

"Don't be silly," Coal chided as he stepped forward to investigate. "We just climbed an *entire mountain* and took down two of Darkwhisperer's warriors. This should be nothin'!"

Cloud smirked at the waver in his tone but said nothing as he moved forward to stare more closely at the gold and yellow. His smirk almost instantly turned to a frown and he felt his legs trying to retreat. "I...I don't think I can do this, Coal. What if something goes wrong? What if I end up on the wrong planet?"

"Then I will *come and get you*," Coal sighed. "Now, *go.*"

"But what if--*aaaaaahhhh*!"

Before he could finish his fret, he felt Coal's strong talons seize him

from behind and shove him forward into the portal.

The world dissolved into a blur of color and he felt his talons leave the ground. He was *falling*. He tried to open his wings but found them plastered to his sides by the gravity and speed of his decline.

There was a loud bang like that of an explosion and his heart stopped. *What was that*? There was no answer. Everything spun, and it felt like he was falling off the side of the mountain again. He opened his wings, but that did nothing to slow his fall. He was moving too fast...he was going to crash...he was going to *die*.

He remembered begging for it to be over, for him to just hit the ground already. And that was when the portal ended and he was spat out into a forest of trees. He had no time to brake, however, and he went flying through the forest, smacking into several layers of thick foliage. Every branch felt like a spear slicing through his body, but he couldn't twist. Couldn't get away.

He was unconscious before he reached the earth, and when he finally *did* hit the ground, he felt nothing.

# Chapter 10

The light flooding through his closed eyelids was infuriating.

So was the tremendous weight against his vertebrae. And the worst part was, the latter was moving. Not moving as in *breathing*. Moving as in *squirming* and *thrashing*. "Coal!" he hissed, trying and failing to heave the massive form from his wings. "Get...*off*."

"Well, it took you boys long enough."

Cloud froze at the familiar snarky voice. Blinking away weariness, he lifted his head, squinting against the sun to recognize the hot pink scales of a certain Raynbow princess. "I said *three days,*" he groaned. "Where are we?"

"About seven miles outside of Hopeland, the southern border of the continent," came another voice. Sun's, Cloud recognized. "You guys all right?" the yellow hatchling went on, and Cloud watched him prod Coal with a talon, making the black dragon moan and shoo him away with a wing. "That was quite a tumble."

"You saw that?" Cloud questioned as Coal moved at last and he was able to drag himself to his paws. Briefly, he wondered how long the four had been waiting. They probably found it quite amusing to watch dragons fall out of the sky.

Sun nodded as Cotton gave a presumptuous snort and rolled her eyes. "It was a bit hard not to," Sun confessed with an embarrassed grimace. "Sorry."

Cloud gave him an encouraging smile. "It's all right," he assured him as he shook a sore talon. "I guess it probably takes practice. It'll get easier with time. So..." he went on, staring around at all of the thick foliage and trees. He could hear birds chirping in the trees and felt the damp grass underneath him. It gave him a feeling of peace that he couldn't quite explain. Not that the others would understand. They were all used to being in the open, out where others could see

them. They probably never thought twice about the freedoms they had. "It's so bright," he complimented, satisfied to see a small flush of pride flash across Cotton's face as she opened her wings and shook them impatiently. "I can see why you're called a Raynbow dragon."

"It is nice," Sun agreed as Coal finally stood up and the two of them came to Cotton's side, "but it's also very *cold*."

For a moment, Cloud was confused. To him, it felt like a sauna. And then he realized, Sun was a desert dragon. He would have been accustomed to much higher temperatures, so it probably *did* feel cold to him.

Cotton growled. "It is *not!*" For once, she sounded...almost *not mad*... as she whacked him in the snout with her tail. "Come on," she added over her shoulder to the others. "Skoutia is at least a day's flight from here. You, black dragon." She paused and wheeled to face Coal "You stay at least a wing-length behind us and watch for tails. We're just flying straight over those hills." She pointed them out in the distance. "And we'll keep going until we reach Skoutia. It's relatively easy to spot. It's the only town out this far."

Coal nodded. He didn't seem to mind the princess bossing him around. Cloud supposed he'd learned it from following Clouddusk's directions for so long. Besides, Cotton seemed to enjoy giving orders. And if she was helping the group, then Cloud decided to let her.

"You four," she added, pointing to the rest of them as she turned and prepared to kick off. "Follow me." And with one quick and graceful motion, she was airborne. The males shared a glance, Cloud dipped his head in a hasty farewell to Coal, and then they scrambled to chase the pink dragonet.

"So this is Raynbowfalles," Cloud breathed as they fell into a loose formation and swept low over the trees. Four glowing suns warmed his spine and wings while a few lonely clouds drifted across a pure blue sky. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. So much nicer than the thick forest and *almost constant* rain of Snowfalle. He wondered what it would have been like to grow up here, under the

heat and wide variety of colors. He imagined his scales becoming as sparkly and shiny as hers and it was almost enough to laugh at. He could see himself going around with scales shimmering like diamonds, though he was pretty sure Raynbow dragons only had sparkles on the underside of their wings.

Then, just to be sure, he tilted his head to check. Yep, magenta hued with occasional glittering spots, almost as if a thin layer of dust had been poured onto her wings. She was the epitome of her species. Breathtaking. *No wonder* she was the heir to the throne.

Darkwhisperer couldn't take over the galaxy. He'd destroy everything good and beautiful, Raynbowfalles included. Cloud couldn't let that happen. Not here. Not anywhere. He would fight with every fiber in his being to prevent that from happening, and he sensed the hatchlings gliding alongside him felt the same.

Perhaps that was why they were chosen. They came from all different backgrounds, had all different stories, but in the end, they had united out of a sense of duty. They were young, inexperienced*, unruly,* but they were a *team*. And Cloud sensed it would take the willpower of all five of them to defeat Darkwhisperer's magic.

"Stunning, isn't it?" Sun questioned as a stray burst of wind caught him and he shuddered noticeably. "Though not as nice as the desert," he added hastily as though he feared the sand would somehow grow ears and become jealous.

"Sure," Cloud agreed diplomatically. He thought nothing was nicer than Snowfalle, but that was just his opinion. He was sure each felt the same about their respective worlds. "S*ooooo*," he went on slowly. "Tell me about yourselves."

Fire smirked slightly and Cotton snorted.

"Oh, come on," Cloud protested. "We're going to be a team, aren't we? Shouldn't we get to know each other a little?"

They shared a glance. Cotton shrugged and looked away, keeping her attention focused on which direction she was flying. Sun rolled his eyes at her before twisting to look at Cloud. "So, I guess I'll go

first. I don't have a lot to say. My full name is Sun Sandstone Scale. Alliteration, I know. I was born on November 25, 2098. I have one sister, Armadillo, and about a *million* older brothers, and I am training to be in the royal guard. See this?" He pointed to a dark tattoo on his neck. "This shows that I'm in training to be a bodyguard. It's the highest honor a Marblerivver hatchling can earn. I want to protect my queen and my planet. That's why I'm here. I hope becoming the Defender of Earth will help me become a better soldier."

"Well, I wish I could say the same," Fire spoke up from near the back. "I bet you can guess what *my* power is. I was also born in 2098, though in October. I hatched with too much fire in my scales...at least that's what I believed until I found out about the prophecy. *One born of death and fire*. *Obviously* me. My name is Fire Forrest Blaze, ironically. Apparently, I started a fire when my egg broke apart." He shrugged, seeing all of their shocked expressions. "I am a triplet," he added as though that would help nullify what he'd just said.

"Wow. O-okay. *Unexpected*," Meadow piped up. He flapped his wings, visibly struggling to keep pace with the bigger hatchlings. "Well, I d-don't know m-my full n-name. Y-you can j-just call me M-meadow. I-I don't m-mind. I-I never m-met m-my parents. I-I've lived a-alone most o-of my life. I d-don't know if I h-have any siblings. I-I think I'm a w-water-dweller, b-but I d-don't l-look like one. I also don't k-know w-where I am i-in the p-prophecy, th-though Clouddusk s-said I-I am the D-Defender of W-weather." And then he put in, "I-I'm also r-really good with t-tools and...building s-stuff."

"That's cool," Cloud complimented. "I didn't know dragons could make things."

Meadow nodded earnestly. "Y-yeah. We-we don't get a-all our ideas f-from the humans, y-you know."

Cotton made snoring noises from up ahead as she doubled back and looped around, waiting impatiently for them to catch up.

"And what about *you*?" Sun challenged. "What's your story, *Oh High*

*and Mighty One*?"

Cotton tossed her head irritably. "I don't have to tell you anything, Rattlesnake."

"That's not my name," Sun grumbled under his breath.

"*Anything*?" Cloud suggested, nudging Sun's shoulder. "Birthday? Reason for your name? Favorite color?"

Cotton sighed super dramatically and swept a talon across the horizon. "This is my world," she said as if it weren't already obvious. "One day, I will rule it all. I was named after the first thing I saw when I hatched. Which, in my case, was the cotton bedding. It's a horrible name and I would have picked *literally* anything else. I am the Defender of Light. I have two younger brothers. My birthday is the same year as sandstorm and flame-scales over there. June 4th." She huffed and frowned at them as they all watched her, waiting for something more. "I like green." She finally added.

For some reason, Meadow perked up at this.

Cloud noticed this and flicked an ear, but he had no time to question it's meaning as he found all eyes moving to him now. "Er...what?" he asked nervously, feeling a bit self-conscious under their stares.

"What about you?" Fire questioned.

"Yeah, you made us all talk about ourselves. Now you have to tell us your story," Sun added. "Like, how did a blue dragon escape the Blazing? And how you manage to hide out for all of these years without anyone noticing? And are you a descendant of Twisterheart? Because that would be super cool and *super terrifying* all at once and--"

"Stop, stop, *stop*," Cloud pleaded, bringing a talon to his pounding head. "One question at a time. I was born after the Blazing. I'm the same age as you. In fact, I think we *all* might be the same age. Clouddusk found me as an egg. And don't ask me how because he never told me. I learned quickly how to stay away from other

dragons. I was always afraid they would see my scales and try to kill me before I could get a chance to explain myself. I don't know, maybe? Are all blue dragons related? I don't know how the genetic process for that works. I'm the Defender of the Sea and I promise I'm nothing like the legends say. I don't have any dangerous powers. I *definitely* can't read minds."

Both Cotton and Fire seemed to relax. Cloud decided to ignore that. He'd read the stories. He knew mind-readers existed. He'd once thought it would be cool to be able to read the thoughts of other dragons, but then he realized how much of a *pain in the neck* it would be to go around hearing *everything* that *everyone* ever thought.

"And how about you, bodyguard?" Cotton challenged, twisting to address Coal who had been flapping quietly behind.

He shrugged. "Not much to tell," he answered. "I'm Coal. I'm half-Raynbowfalles, half-Monterra. I have lived with Cloud my entire life. Clouddusk also found me as an egg. I don't know my parents. I don't care to. I wanted to be a Defender. It didn't happen. I'm here to support my best friend. End of story."

"That was very unexciting," Fire sighed.

Coal shrugged. "Sorry."

"So how are we planning to stop Darkwhisperer?" Sun intervened before a spat could break out. "I know we said we'd talk about it and...I can't think of a better time."

The others shared a glance, and it was Meadow who spoke first. "Well, w-we'll have t-to deal with his s-shadows."

"Shades," Cloud cut in helpfully.

Meadow nodded, shoving up his glasses. "R-right. T-thank you. H-his *Shades*. I-I saw one once. T-they seem i-invincible. L-like they're s-smoke."

"They can be defeated by a Defender's magic," Coal called as he swooped lower to join them, nearly overshooting his dive and

crashing into a tree. "We found that out on our way here." They looked like they wanted to ask how, but Cotton interrupted with a nod.

"Okay," she said. "So that's good. At least we know of one way. But what about Darkwhisperer? I have a feeling he won't go as quietly."

*She's right,* Cloud realized. The evil dragon's words echoed through his brain. *"You're not a Defender. You're not even a hero. I look forward to killing you."* He didn't seem like a dragon who would give up easily. They would have to be well prepared for whatever he threw at them.

"Well, can we discuss it down there?" Sun questioned, pointing toward a small patch of rocks and oaks. It seemed a bit out of place, surrounded by spruce and Acadia, but Cloud suddenly felt the weariness of his wings pass through him as well and he only nodded his agreement. *It feels like we've been flying for* hours! "Anybody else hungry? I think I saw a lizard or two."

Meadow blanched and the others either shook their heads or pointedly didn't answer. Sun shrugged as though it didn't bother him and tipped his wings to glide toward the rocks.

"We should stay together," Coal warned. "And besides, it's going to be dark soon."

Cloud glanced at the suns, startled to see that Coal was right. He hadn't noticed how quickly the dark shadows had been overtaking the landscape or how fast night was coming. Still, it was strange. It had only been noon on Snowfalle! Had they really been flying all afternoon?

Seeing his expression, Fire turned to answer. "Time works differently on every Realm," he explained. "Day can be night and dawn can be dusk. Something you'll learn after a while. Come on." With that, he dipped from the air, leading the others after Sun who had already landed and was scoping out the land for anything to eat. He immediately went to help him, and Cotton went to lie by some rocks. Coal, meanwhile, elected to search the area for danger and disappeared into the trees.

"I'll s-start a fire," Meadow volunteered, bounding away from the group to the most open place he could find, near a small creek. Cloud watched curiously as he began to gather up sticks and clack to stones together, hoping to get a spark. Nothing happened, and after a few more moments of clacking, Cotton gave a groan and rolled to face him with narrowed eyes.

"Would you stop that *infernal noise*!" she snapped.

Meadow jumped, dropping the stones into the creek with a splash. "How else a-am I supposed t-to m-make a-a flame?" he protested, already feeling among the mud for new rocks.

"Why don't you *breathe* on it?" she suggested innocently. "You *are* a dragon, aren't you? And *even sea dragons* can breathe fire."

At that, Meadow looked *extremely* sheepish. "Um...y-yeah...about t-*that*."

"Oh for... *never mind*. I'll do it myself." Cotton got up and irritably made her way to the pile of sticks and brambles. She shooed Meadow away with a wing, and the littlest hatchling went willingly, backing off with wide eyes. Cotton ignored this as she took a deep breath and let out a breath of flames that immediately set the wood aflame. Then, before Meadow could stutter out a thank you, she walked away.

"Maybe *now* I can get some sleep," she mumbled to Cloud as he gave her a questioning glance. Cloud nodded, though he doubted it. He watched patiently as the she-dragon shuffled off to a small and somewhat dry corner of the clearing. His ears twitched and he turned, hearing a rustle in the weeds as Sun and Fire returned. The former was carrying a mouthful of lizards and the latter held a couple of rabbits. Slung over their backs as they shared the weight was a good-sized deer.

"Hey guys," Sun exclaimed as they piled the meat near to the flames. "You should have seen the size of some of those animals! They were *huge*!"

Meadow yelped as the stag was dropped beside him, and he nearly

fell backward into the water, saved only by his quick reflexes, snapping his wings out to steady himself.

Cotton snorted flames and turned over so her back was facing them.

Cloud felt weariness grip his body like talons. He plodded forward to take up a position near the fire and settled down, his eyes drooping before he could stop them. He was only half-conscious of the four remaining dragons splitting the food and offering him some, though he was too tired to eat anything. He was unsure how much time passed, but before he drifted off, he was aware of the others pressing up close to him. He felt Sun's scales radiating heat over him on one side, and Meadow's cool, damp spikes on the other. Fire kept his distance, but the warmth from his body was still noticeable. Coal settled between Sun and Meadow, and Cotton elected to stay by herself in the reeds.

The confrontation on the mountain played over and over in his brain, and every time, the images grew worse. Him falling to his death. Coal, lying dying on the black rock. One of the others bleeding out before him with him powerless to help. He knew he was as exhausted as the rest of them, but he decided to take the first watch, knowing that sleep would be a long time coming that night.

# Chapter 11

The following morning dawned bright and early.

Cloud awoke to a *scrape-scrape-scraping* noise and slowly cracked open his eyelids to see Coal already up and moving about the clearing. Their eyes met and Coal gave him a small smirk before returning to his pacing.

At first, Cloud didn't understand what the look had been about, and then he became aware of a loud snoring coming from just to his left. He twisted his neck to find the tangle of hatchlings behind him. Sometime in the night, it seemed, they had played a game of twister and were knotted up in the craziest of ways. From where he lay, he could clearly see the bright green tone of Meadow's tail, which had somehow ended up between Sun and Cloud's bodies, and one of Cotton's wings.

He wished he had a way to record the moment, for he was sure they would all deny it later. He tried to stand but found Sun firmly pressed against his wings. *Okay...so* that's *not going to work.* Instead, he tried to wriggle his way out. When that didn't work either, he huffed and looked to Coal for help. The black dragon only smiled and went back to circling.

*Traitor.*

Cloud sighed and rested his head on his foretalons, feeling his stomach rumble in protest as he stared at the pile of fish just out of reach. Maybe if he could move at *just the right* angle...He tried to shift the weight of his body and lift his wings enough to cushion Sun as he lifted himself from the ground, ignoring the shudder that raced through his bones from the cold soil.

Sun remained motionless and sound asleep. However, a high-pitched yawn could be heard as Meadow's head popped up from the cluster, and he blinked sleepily from behind his rims. "M-morning," he mumbled, detaching himself from the others and padding toward

the creek. "W-what time i-is it?"

"About eight," Coal answered, bounding over to meet him. "I was considering going on without you guys if you lazy sloths didn't get a move on." He flashed Meadow a smile and the sea hatchling returned it as he stepped into the creek and closed his eyes with a sigh of relief. Cloud guessed this was the longest the green dragonet had been away from Watterlaek. He suspected he might be homesick. "Isn't it beautiful out here?" Coal added, spreading his wings to gesture skyward.

"It's the complete *opposite* of beautiful," Fire grumbled as he opened his dark eyes to glare at them. "I'm not a morning dragon," he explained when Meadow frowned at him. But, still, he heaved himself to his paws, letting his tail sweep across the crater of withered grass left in his wake.

Cloud chuckled, feeling his eyelids grow heavy once more. Perhaps he could go back to sleep while the others were talking? *Surely* he wouldn't miss anything important, right? He felt a brief pang of longing for thick trees and dense foliage. He missed Snowfalle. He had a fleeting thought of what would happen if he turned back and went home that day. *I can't be selfish*, he reminded himself sternly, shoving that train of thought away. *This is about so much more than me. All of Dragnaple is counting on the five of us. I can't leave now.*

"*Hey*!" came Coal's loud voice near his head as a talon poked him in the side. "The captain doesn't sleep on duty! *Wake up,* you intolerable sea urchin!"

"*Who's* an intolerable sea urchin?" said a muffled voice from somewhere over his right shoulder and he instinctively jerked to see who it was, but was unable to distinguish between the two dragons' scales and could see no visible movement from either.

"*Cloud*," Coal huffed, stomping at the ground impatiently as he turned away to fish.

Cloud scowled at the hatchling as he opened and closed his wings repeatedly to get the blood flowing once more. As he did, he heard Cotton give a protesting moan from his right. He realized she'd

moved to join them in the night. And, as he turned to study her, he found her staring back through narrowed slits.

"Would you two quit bickering like an old married couple? *Some of us* are trying to sleep."

Coal's gaze met Cloud's and he rolled his eyes dramatically. Meadow stiffened and looked away sharply, though not before Cloud spotted a ferocious blush rush across his face. He tilted his head, feeling extremely confused. *What's up with him?* He was half tempted to ask but refrained as the water dweller clambered out of the river and shook his scales, sending droplets everywhere. At the noise, both Sun and Cotton stirred and shifted just enough to free the blue hatchling who gratefully sprang to his feet.

"I'm going to get some air," Cloud told Coal as he turned and scanned the lightening sky. "I won't be long," he added, noticing the hatchling's troubled expression. "Go ahead and wake the others if they aren't up by the time I'm out of sight."

Coal nodded, watching Cloud rise into the air and take off into the trees.

The morning air was crisp and fresh. Cloud inhaled deeply as he gave one final pump of his wings and pushed his way out of the trees. The sky to the left and right of him was clear, and ahead of him, he could only see the distant hills Cotton had told them about, rising from the fog like claws toward the heavens. He wondered how far away they were. A day or two's flight, at least.

He climbed higher into the air where the clouds were thinner and the sunshine could more fully expand across his wings. He saw very few living beings at this altitude, but he didn't mind. The quiet was a nice change, and he was far more accustomed to it than being surrounded by a squad of snipping, irritable dragonets. He wondered if this had been what it had felt like to Clouddusk as the Defender led his team across the universe. Had he ever worried about the consequences of failure? Did he know Darkwhisperer's true intentions when they first met? Could he understand how much pressure to measure up he'd placed on Cloud's shoulders?

As he scanned the horizon, he vaguely recalled what he had studied in his scrolls about the Realm. *Claw Point Mountains*, he thought, recognizing their distinct upper points. *Home of some of the most dangerous non-dragon creatures. Stories tell of birds big enough to eat a dragon whole and serpents that can kill with a single bite. Originally thought to be the birthplace of Darkwhisperer.*

He shivered slightly at the thought of being so close to the evil dragon's origin. His mind went once more to what the world would be like if Darkwhisperer won. He could almost hear the screams of panic and death, and he had to close his eyes to block out any further thoughts.

*Legends also say it is the location of the first trial. A trial of fire.*

*That's where we have to go first.*

He wondered what the others would think when he told them. Sun and Meadow would be all for it. Fire would only sigh and agree to get it over with. Cotton would be dead set against it, pointing out that they were *supposed* to be going to Skoutia, not site-seeing. Coal wouldn't care one way or another, so long as they did *something.*

With a sigh, he turned and flew back toward the others, when something caught his eye.

A *glint.* Coming from the ground.

It flashed on and off, almost like some sort of code. Cloud paused, watching it closely, searching the meadow for signs of a trap. *It's a signal,* he realized with a jolt. Cautiously, he started toward it. He wished once more for the power to change his scales, but there was nothing to be done about that now. He would have to be on the defensive, ready to flee if it turned out to be a trap.

As he neared the ground, he spotted a slim white figure poking his head out from behind a cluster of rocks. It was a dragon, he realized. A Raynbow one. About his age. Much more rugged looking. He was lying against the rocks, his wings extended to shield a mass that Cloud couldn't see. Two bright green eyes blinked up at him as he landed, and it was only then that he noticed the

dragonet wasn't alone.

"What happened?" he demanded, landing hard against the dirt.

"Help," the hatchling pleaded, folding back his wing to reveal a smaller she-dragon. She was badly injured. Something wooden protruded from her side and a pool of blood was gathering around her body. "*Please*...we were attacked...my sister...help her." He stared up at Cloud. He didn't care that Cloud was blue. All he cared was that the dragon at his side was dying, and there was nothing he could do.

Cloud immediately hurried to help, taking the hatchling's talons gently in his, noting the gasp of pain from her as he began to run a claw up her shoulder to stabilize her head. *She's losing too much blood. I have to stop the bleeding.* He hastily rested his foretalons over the wound and pressed down hard while searching for something to take his place.

"*You!*" he barked, not caring if he sounded harsh or cruel. The white hatchling jumped and his head snapped up fearfully. "I need something to hold around this wound while I pull out the spear."

The hatchling immediately flapped off and Cloud closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. He rolled his neck as he struggled to recall the first-aid techniques he'd learned years ago. *Apply pressure to the wound. Pull out the spear and quickly sterilize the opening. Find something for her to bite on...*

His eyes fell on a downed tree limb near the edge of the forest. He scrambled to grab it and return before she could lose anymore blood. "Okay," he whispered to her, even if he wasn't sure she could hear him. "My name is Cloud. I'm here to help you. This is going to hurt, all right?"

She gave no response.

Heart thudding against his ribs, he carefully slid the branch into her jaws and positioned himself to remove the spear. The white hatchling winged over right before he began, dropping a load of moss at his feet.

"Will this do?" he questioned.

"Yes," Cloud nodded, taking the plants and setting them next to him. "What's her name?"

"Lark," he answered.

"All right. Lark? I'm going to remove the spear now." He took it firmly between his teeth and gave it a hard yank. The hatchling screamed but didn't move. Cloud spat out the wood, ignoring the splinters against his tongue, and immediately breathed a gentle wave of hot air over the wound. He had no way to properly burn away the infection, but it should at least hold long enough for her brother to get her to a healing camp. "Moss!" he growled and the male jumped to obey, grabbing a bunch and handing it over with quaking talons. Cloud took them and carefully began to position them across Lark's side. He paused to check her breathing. It was faint, but she was alive.

"Will she be all right?" the hatchling whispered.

Cloud nodded. "She'll be okay," he assured him. "But she needs a doctor. Is there one nearby?"

"J-just past those trees," he answered, pointing back the way Cloud had come. "I-I'll get her there right away!"

"Wait," Cloud requested, grabbing the hatchling's forelimb as he went to lift the she-dragon. "Can you tell me who did this?"

He shook his head. "Some group of dragons," he answered. "Never seen them before, but they weren't from around here, I tell you."

"What did they look like?" Cloud questioned.

"Big," the dragonet answered. "Bigger than you. Black. Not Monterra though. I didn't recognize the breed. Oh...and their eyes were purple."

*Purple eyes? Shades.* Cloud watched, frozen in shock, as the brother lifted his sister onto his back and took to the air. He was gone moments later, but Cloud continued to stand there, stunned. They

were already there...Darkwhisperer had already arrived...they had been too slow. *I have to get back to the others!* he realized. They had to keep moving if they wanted to get ahead of the army.

He quickly flew back to the hollow where he found the others awake and stalking around the hollow impatiently. Sun was the first to notice him as he looked up from a pile of lizards and lifted a wing in greeting. The others were gathered around the fire ring. Coal and Fire were attempting to cover up the charred debris and ashes while Cotton lay to the side, dozing lazily in the sunlight.

Cloud opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by Meadow as the small hatchling dropped to the earth near him and trotted toward Cotton, a large trout in his talons. He plopped it in front of her and took a step back, waiting, eyes shining hopefully, and that was when it clicked in Cloud's brain. *Meadow has a crush on Cotton*! That explained the weird looks he'd been noticing. The littlest hatchling *clearly* liked her but had no idea how to go about confessing so.

Cotton wrinkled her snout, though it was unclear whether it was the fish or the dragon she despised more. "*What* in *all of the cursed stars is* that?" She stared at the fish in distaste and slid it away with a talon.

"T-trout," Meadow answered. "T-thought you might b-be h-hungry." He gazed down at his talons and rocked back and forth on his heels nervously.

Cotton snorted. "I don't eat fish." She stood up abruptly and, with an abrupt flick of her tail, shouldered her way past him toward a grove of apple trees across the water.

"*Oh*," Meadow whispered. He slowly slunk forward to pick up the fish and shuffled off to hide in a dark corner of the clearing.

Cloud watched him go pityingly. *It was a good effort, but I suspect it's going to take a lot more than food to woo her.* He exhaled and lifted his eyes to scan the clearing worriedly. If the hatchling had been attacked just outside of their camp, that meant the Shades couldn't be far away. It wouldn't be safe for them to remain any longer.

"How's it coming?" he questioned, wandering up to Coal and Fire.

"Almost done," Fire answered. He looked up and frowned, noticing Cloud's expression. "Why? What's wrong?"

"We have to get moving," Cloud answered, unfurling his wings and easily clearing the lake to land beside an unimpressed Cotton. "There was an attack on a dragon not too far away from here. It was the Shades."

Cotton's eyes widened. "Who?"

"Someone named Lark," Cloud replied, "but she's going to be fine," he added, seeing her panicked look. "Darkwhisperer can't be too far behind. We should pack up and go as soon as possible."

"We're ready," Sun informed him, wandering over to join them. "I take it you found our next stop?"

Cottons ears twisted toward him alertly. "'Next stop'?" she echoed. "What are you talking about? I thought we were going to Skoutia."

"Change of plan," Cloud explained. "We're going to complete the five trials. There might be a clue there to how to stop Darkwhisperer."

"Trials?" Cotton sneered. "You're joking, right?"

"No." Cloud looked at her in confusion. "Why?"

"Because *everyone* knows the trials aren't real!" the princess exclaimed. "They're just some made-up fairytale to keep little hatchlings in line. They can't possibly exist!"

"W-well, a-actually--" Meadow began.

Cotton wheeled on him, eyes flashing. "No one asked you, fish-muncher. So *can it*."

Meadow whimpered and back-peddled into Sun. Cloud sighed and struggled to refrain from rolling his eyes. "They exist," he growled, flicking his tail and gesturing for them to gather around. "And the

first one is the trial of fire." He immediately looked toward Fire who turned pale.

"A-are you s-sure?" he spluttered. "I'm...I'm not exactly...the best a-at a-anything. What if I mess up?"

"You'll be fine," Coal assured him, bounding up. "Just remember two things. First, stop talking like Meadow."

"H-hey!" the hatchling protested.

"And we're going to be with you the entire time," Coal went on as though Meadow hadn't spoken, "so you won't be in any real danger."

"Like anything could hurt me," Fire proclaimed, though he sounded more solemn about it than pleased. "And I suppose there is no way to avoid it, is there?" He flicked his gaze hopefully toward Coal, as though the black hatchling might somehow magically produce an out.

"'Fraid not," Coal replied. "It's the only way to fully unlock your powers."

Fire smirked wryly. "To be fair, I'm not sure how much more "unlocking" the world can take." As he spoke, he stepped off a particularly singed portion of grass into the water. "But I guess I have no option. When do we leave?"

* * *

The Jagged Talon Mountain Range ran alongside the eastern portion of the continent and expanded for a vast distance across the open plains. Near the center of the peaks, Coal recognized the unorthodox shape of Claw Point. Unlike the other mountains, which all had a noticeable tilt to the left, this one leaned absurdly far to the right. And that was where they needed to go.

"There is supposed to be an opening somewhere near the summit," Coal had explained. "From there, the chosen Defender is to follow a series of passageways and complete several challenges to prove his worth."

They had circled the cliffs several times, and yet, had found nothing that looked even remotely like an opening of any kind. After navigating the peaks twice more, Cloud finally decided they needed to talk about their strategy and signaled for them to land. Then, once they had gathered on an unusually large ledge, he began to explain their dilemma.

"There's no opening anywhere on this mountain," he announced. His voice reverberated off of the cliff face and he winced, toning it down a few decibels. "Either it caved in over the years, or it's not visible from the air."

"Well, *duh*," Cotton said. "*I* could have told you that. Hundreds of dragons have flown by this range. *None of them* have ever seen anything."

"So then how do we complete the trial?" Sun quizzed.

"W-well, f-fire is what t-this trial i-is all a-about," Meadow suggested as he dropped onto the slab of rock last and trotted around to join them. "S-so maybe we h-have to w-wait until a-after d-dark?"

"Well, *that's* stupid," Cotton huffed, kicking a rock irritably with her tail. "Why make a trial if you can't even *see* it to complete it?"

"But if Fire lit the clearing up with his flames," Cloud said thoughtfully. "Then maybe we could see something we missed before."

Fire nodded. "I can do that." He lifted into the air and flew toward a nearby overhang, breathing out a wave of fire, momentarily lighting the shadows. "See anything?"

"No," Coal answered.

"How about now?" Fire fluttered to his left and hissed out another flame.

"No."

"Here?"

"Nothing."

"What about here?"

"Still no."

"Okay, since this is *clearl*y not working," Cotton interjected. "Why don't you fly back down here and we'll come up with a *real* plan."

Fire sheepishly came back to the ledge and dug his talons into the rock with a frown. "*Obviously* there is something we are missing. You two," he added, twisting to face Coal and Meadow. "Nerds. What do you know about this?"

They shared an uneasy glance, and it was Coal who spoke first. "Not much. Clouddusk wasn't much of a writer. What little we *do* know comes from--"

"Pause," Sun interrupted, holding up his talons. "Skip to the part that helps us, please."

Coal puffed a cloud of smoke. "*The point is;* every trial has three levels.

Knowledge, honesty, and courage. Perhaps finding the entrance is part of the first level." He shrugged.

"So what do I do?" Fire questioned. "I guess I could just...strut around and look brave. Would that do it?"

"I highly doubt it."

"I'll try anyway," Fire decided, unfolding his wings to give a mighty flap. Cotton ducked as he nearly hit her with a wing and scowled fiercely at him.

"And maybe try to keep us all in one piece while you're at it," she growled.

Fire ignored her as he lifted into the air. The sound of his heavy wingbeats bounced off of the mountains, and tiny embers rained down on their heads from his scales.

"This is pointless," Cotton complained, dropping down against the rock impatiently. "He's never going to find anything *that way*. Why don't we just flip a coin and see where it lands? It would make more sense than--"

"I found something!"

Cloud's head shot up at Fire's call. He saw the hatchling's tail snake around a crag and disappear from view. With a glance toward the others, Cloud quickly hurried after him.

Fire was hovering near a small dip in the rocks. The light from his flames lit up the surface of the cliff, revealing strange markings sliced into the stone. "What do you all make of this?" he questioned, pointing to it.

"It's ancient w-writing," Meadow exclaimed, adjusting his glasses excitedly. "U-used b-back in the t-time of t-the Blazing."

"Can you read it?" Sun questioned.

"I'll try." He leaned up to try and read the inscriptions. "H-here lies Cyclone, t-the first of t-the Great Legion. M-may his legacy carry o-on for many g-generations. A-and to all, m-may the sky grant y-you t-talons o-of f-fire." He glanced up at them. "T-this i-is it."

"So how do we get in?" Cotton questioned.

"T-there should b-be a l-lever or something n-nearby."

"Everybody start looking," Cloud commanded. They instantly spread out and Cloud ran his talons across the cold dry rock. By the fading light of Fire's flames, he got one quick glance at the scribbles of five dragons standing together, power exploding around them.

"Guys! I think there's something over here!" Sun shouted.

Cloud took a mental picture of the images before turning and picking Sun out of the fog. The sand dragon was clinging, nearly upside down, to a thin ledge. From where he hung, he was free to point a wing toward the rocks...toward a *lever*.

"That's it," Coal confirmed, coming up behind him. "Fire?"

"Right." The red hatchling swooped from his search to join them. He reached out to touch it, but retracted his talon at the last moment. "Um...would one of you mind...ah...I don't think I can..." he stammered, gesturing to the liquid lava that seemed to be coursing between his scales.

"I got it," Sun volunteered, pulling the lever.

"Thanks."

As the two dragons spoke, there was a loud creaking coming from all around. Immediately, the six went back to back, bracing themselves for whatever was about to happen. Cloud felt his heart rate spike and he hastily scanned the air, searching for the source of the disturbance.

"Uh...anybody wanna take a stab at what *that* is?" Coal yelled from somewhere to his left.

Meadow seemed to riddle it out first. He twisted around sharply to gaze up at the shadowed face of the cliff. "I-it's the m-mountain," he stammered.

*HUH*? Cloud spun abruptly and followed the Defender's gaze. He gasped. The entire mountain had shifted! He could see the crevice between two large boulders, right where the lever should have been. *This is the entrance to the trial!*

He spotted movement out of the corner of his eyes, and he turned away as Fire shot past him toward the opening, his scales becoming brighter as he neared the entrance.

Cloud flicked his tail and they all trailed the flame dragon. A distant rumble of thunder was audible as Fire landed at the entrance to the cavern and took a deep shaky breath.

"It's all right," Cloud heard Coal speak up from beside him. "We're all right here with you." His voice was calm, but Cloud could practically *feel* the hatchling bouncing with excitement. This was a dream come true for him, and it was obviously taking a lot of

willpower to prevent him from streaking down the corridor and exploring *everything*.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. It's all good. I'm all right," Fire tried to convince himself.

"Oh, for Dragnaple's *sake*, can we please get a *move on?"* Cotton snarled from near the back. "I thought we were pressed for time!"

Cloud tried to shoot her a shushing look, but it was impossible to distinguish her from the shadows. Nevertheless, her words seemed to cause a reaction from Fire. The red hatchling took a nervous step forward and the others followed cautiously.

There was a loud groan and boulders crashed down across the entrance, blocking their exit and plunging everything into darkness. The hatchlings screamed and panicked, instantly beginning to bump and jab each other in their haste to escape.

Cloud froze where he stood, closing his eyes and fighting to gather his bearings. He felt someone slam into him and he staggered slightly, but somehow managed to stay upright as he took a deep breath and prepared to take charge.

He opened his jaws to roar into the darkness, but someone else got there before him.

"EVERYBODY, *QUIET!"*

# Chapter 12

Sun's voice rang out through the panic, successfully silencing the chaos.

Cloud took a deep breath, grateful for the sand dragon's sudden rise in command, and honed in on the calmest element in the caves--the gentle whistling of the wind between the cracks in the cliffs. Around him, he could hear the frantic breaths of his team, and he was aware of them clustering together near where the rocks had caved. Claws scraped against the hard floor and hisses of both fear and excitement began to bubble up from within him.

"Is everybody all right?" Cloud questioned over the rumbles of unease. "Is anybody hurt?"

"No, we're fine," came Coal's voice from somewhere near the door. "Just a little shaken up."

"*Excuse me*!" Cotton protested. "But we are certainly *not* fine! I can't see a thing...and I'm *covered* in dirt!"

"We're all fine," Coal repeated.

She growled at him, but he ignored it, the sound of footsteps alerting Cloud to his friend's approaching presence. "It's dark," Cloud hissed to him. "What should we do?"

"I suppose a certain *Defender of Light* can't use her powers to *light up* the area?" Coal commented innocently.

"And that's coming from the *one dragon here* who has absolutely *zero* powers?" the princess retorted loudly.

"Cloud," Coal said through gritted teeth. His voice was more distant, meaning he had turned away from the blue hatchling. "It's dark. Do you think anyone will know if I killed her now and left her body here?"

"No," Cloud answered sharply.

"'No' as in 'I could totally get away with it' or 'no' as in 'that's a terrible idea'?"

"'No' as in 'I don't want to be the one who has to arrest you and explain to her parents why their eldest daughter and heir to the throne of an *entire planet* is lying dead inside a mountain somewhere'," Cloud growled. "Now, come on. I know you. I know about your nocturnal eyesight and that you've probably already found a way out of this cave, so why don't you ignore her and focus on leading us out of here?"

Coal grunted, but dutifully padded away. Cloud could hear his tail slipping off of the wall as he rounded a corner and worked his way across the cavern toward the others.

"All right," Cloud went on, not daring to move, lest he trip and fall or crash into somebody. "I need you to remain calm, and one by one, we're going to work our way out of here. Coal?"

"Here," came the growl from somewhere to his right.

"Fire?"

"Right here."

"This is your trial, so you should probably go first. Using the wall as your guide, try to work your way toward Coal's voice."

"And try not to touch us as you go," Sun put in helpfully, earning a friendly growl from the red dragon.

There was a clatter of claws and Cloud felt a wave of heat blow past as he honed in on the movement near his left flank, where he guessed the exit must have been. "Where are you?" Fire grunted. "Am I close?"

"Almost there," Coal's voice was closer now. "Here. I'll just...yaaahh...never mind." Cloud had the sneaking suspicion Coal had attempted to put a talon on Fire's shoulder to guide him out, but had talked himself out of it in the nick of time. "Just keep

coming forward. Yes, that's it. About ten more steps! Oh! Watch out! There's a dip there!"

"And how is it your friend--bodyguard--can see so well in the dark?"

Cloud jumped at the sound of Sun's voice in his ear. He was embarrassed to admit that he'd been so intent in listening to the traded comments from the two hatchlings, that he hadn't noticed the desert dragon feeling his way toward him. He swung his head around, squinting, but unable to pinpoint Sun's exact location. Somewhere nearby, he estimated, by the soothing warmth that was pressing against his body. "I don't know," he admitted, speaking to the darkness. "I guess it must be part of his heritage." He shrugged, though it was pointless as he knew Sun couldn't see it.

The hatchling snorted. "Not likely," he growled. "How much do you know about the different breed abilities?"

"Not much," Cloud confessed. "Watterlaek dragons can breathe underwater, Starrlande hatchlings can sometimes change colors or foresee the future, Raynbowfalles dragonets can see really well in the dark--"

"No."

"No?"

"No," Sun emphasized. "Raynbowfalles hatchlings don't have any powers. They don't see well in the dark. No breed can."

"But...Coal..." Cloud frowned, confused. "But I thought..." He trailed off. What *did* he think? For as long as he could remember, he recalled Coal telling him it had to do with his parents, but if he was from Raynbowfalles, that no longer seemed plausible. "I guess he's just special," he finally blurted, determined to stand up for his friend no matter what.

Sun scoffed. "Maybe," he said in a low voice. "Listen, I know he's your friend, and you've known him for a long time, but, I'm telling you this now as someone who's job it is to stop clever and evil psychopaths, I don't trust him. There's something odd about, well,

everything."

"Odd doesn't necessarily mean *evil*," Cloud argued. "And Coal isn't evil," he added for good measure. "He's just..." he trailed off, not knowing how best to finish his thought. He felt Sun's disbelieving gaze on him, and he hissed out the first thing that came to mind. "*Different.*"

"Where I come from, *different* is often *dangerous,"* Sun argued. "Look," he added, ruffling his wings tiredly. "I'm not saying that he *is* anything. I'm just telling you, those you trust, they are the ones most likely to betray you in the end. Trust me on that."

"Coal's not evil," Cloud repeated stubbornly. *He's not. He can't, like,* really *can't be. I would have noticed, would have seen it. Sun's just paranoid.* And he was about to tell the yellow hatchling so when a tired snap flooded the corridor.

"Are you two going to stand around gossiping all day or are you *actually* going to join us?"

Cloud jerked out of his own thoughts, realizing the other hatchlings had already exited the caverns and Sun was hastily scrambling away from him toward Cotton's irritable voice.

Without a word, he pressed a wing against the solid rock walls, inching away from the entrance, inhaling and exhaling deeply to steady his nervous breaths. "All right," he called. "I'm coming. Which way, Coal?"

"About five more steps forward, then three right."

Cloud obeyed quietly, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the blackness that surrounded his talons. As much as he believed Coal innocent, Sun's words continued to push their way into his brain, and, to his despair, so did the vision. *Don't be ridiculous,* he snapped at himself. *You* know *him. There is no way he could be dangerous. Or evil.*

"Yo! Cloud! You good?"

There was a small flash of distinguishable movement out of his left eye, and he was suddenly aware of a second presence at his side,

and, to his dismay, he tensed when he realized who it was.

"Hey," Coal went on, tapping his shoulder with a talon. "Cloud, are you all right? You seem...what's a gentle way to put it?"

"Gastly?" Cotton quipped.

"Pale?" Fire suggested.

"Peakish?" Meadow offered.

Coal grunted. "Yes, thank you. *Peakish.* You look...peakish." He threw a wing around Cloud's shoulders and began to steer him toward the exit.

Cloud swallowed back a thousand questions and focused more firmly on the ground as it slowly became visible again. "I'm fine," he replied, blinking as he emerged into a dimly lit cavern where the others were waiting for him. He couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped him when he realized he could see their faces once again. "What are you all staring at?"

They didn't answer and Cloud frowned, but before he could say anything more, Fire turned slowly to face a long, winding hallway.

"Fire-scales first," Cotton said.

Fire twisted to face her in alarm. "I thought it was *ladies* first," he protested.

"Well, *I'm* not going first down some creepy old passageway," she retorted with a shrug. "Besides, this is *your* trial."

Fire scowled in her direction as he started down the hall, his scales bubbling with heat. Scorch marks were left in his wake, and the others were careful not to step in the same places for fear of being burned.

"T-this place i-is *amazing*," Meadow whispered from Cloud's left. He glanced around at the walls, where torches hung, having apparently lit on their own upon their arrival. "I-it must be o-over a-a thousand y-years old! L-look at t-the writing!" He gestured to the scratches

and markings in the stone. "N-no one h-has used it i-in over...f-five h-hundred years!"

"So, how can you read it then?" Cotton challenged.

He glanced at her over his lenses. "I h-had a l-lot of f-free t-time a-as a hatchling."

The princess scoffed. "How much time was *that*?" She growled when Sun flicked her snout with his tail warningly as he passed, but was not deterred by it as she kept her eyes on Meadow.

Cloud sighed loudly as he pushed past the two to follow Fire and Coal. "Okay, guys, come on. We can argue later. Right now, we're here to help Fire," he reminded them sternly. He swept a wing after him to signal for the others to follow. They did so reluctantly.

The corridor was narrow and shallow. Cloud was uncomfortably aware of the increasing amount of dirt packing the walls the further they got from the cavern. Images of the entire structure caving in on them repeatedly flashed through his brain no matter how hard he tried to push them away. He took a deep breath, squeezing between a jutting bolder and Sun's wings as they rounded a bend and the hall opened to a large room. As they all filed in, Cloud took a moment to scan the new cave.

It was *big*. At least twice the size of the one back on Snowfalle. Weird glowing objects clung to the ceiling. *Some sort of plankton?* he wondered. But didn't plankton grow near water? And weren't they on a mountain? Somehow, those two seemed very far apart. "Meadow," he whispered to the green hatchling as he entered the room. "You see those things? Any idea what they are?"

Meadow scrunched his nose, possibly concentrating. "N-no," he said after a moment. "I-I've n-never seen a-anything l-like it. A f-fungus, m-maybe?"

"Hmmm," Cloud hummed. He was considering what to say next when he was interrupted by a loud gasp from Fire.

"Guys! Come look at this!"

Curious, Cloud twisted around and hurried toward his teammate, muscles tensed and wings partially open in case of an attack. He spotted Sun running too. However, he couldn't locate Coal or Cotton. He guessed they'd stopped to look at something in the hall. *Stop worrying so much*, he scolded himself as he rounded a mound of rocks and found Fire standing in the middle of the room, facing down a circular portion of the cave which was illuminated with some kind of red light. A small gold pedestal stood upright in the center and on it, shimmering with sparkles of fire, rested a large red stone.

"Is that it?" Sun questioned, coming up behind him. "The stone?"

"I think so," Fire breathed. "Um..." he twisted his head back to look at them. "What do I...what do I do?"

"Maybe we should read the walls first?" Coal suggested, bounding up, Cotton right on his tail. "Epigrapher, I do believe that is your cue." He turned toward Meadow who was already busy running his talons against the rocks and mumbling a bunch of nonsense.

Coal rolled his eyes. "In *Dragon,* please."

"S-sorry. Y-yes. It s-seems to b-be part of t-the p-prophecy. *One born of d-death and f-fire, s-shall di-discover the s-secret of a p-power h-higher.* T-there's some kind o-of marking here." His talon rested solidly on a small crack in the stone and he hesitated. "Fire, y-you might w-wanna t-take a l-look a-at this."

The jungle hatchling hastened to obey and, as he brought up his talon to touch the marking, Meadow ducked away, blinking furiously. "It's a claw mark," Fire determined, touching the imprint cautiously, watching the stone blacken beneath his talon.

"By the look of that wall, I'd say it was burnt," Sun commented.

Fire's eyes widened as he held his talon up beside the mark. Even from where Cloud was standing, he could see how *huge* the shape was. It had come from a *much bigger dragon.* "Do you think--" he began.

"Cyclone," Coal finished with a nod. "No doubt. This is probably his way of saying 'you completed the first trial'."

"Should I...should I grab the stone now?"

"Yes," Coal nodded. "You're supposed to take it. It will help you unlock your powers."

"Okay," Fire said, putting on a brave face as he spun and trudged back toward the pedestal. He tilted his head to study it. "So, is there, like, a special way I have to take it? Or do I just grab it?"

Coal shrugged. "Just grab it, I suppose. Besides, you've completed all the trials already."

"I did?"

"He *did*?" Meadow added with a deep frown.

Coal bobbed his head. "Yeah. Don't you remember? The black cave was "courage". The ruins were "knowledge" and Fire being the only one to touch the stone is "honesty"."

"Um...a-actually *I* deciphered those r-ruins..." Meadow mumbled, but Coal waved him off with a talon.

"*How* isn't important," he explained. "So long as all three criteria have been met, the stone is free to go to its rightful owner. That being Fire."

Meadow still didn't look convinced, but he only shrugged, mumbling something that sounded like, "You're the expert."

If Coal heard the remark, he gave no response and only turned back to face Fire, who was busy staring at the pedestal nervously. "Just go for it," he advised. "Besides, we are all here. What's the worst that could happen?"

It was then that a sharp pain decided to flash through Cloud's brain. He gasped, reeling back as a series of images flashed through his head.

Axes.

Blood.

Fire...dying...drowning in his own blood.

"Fire! *Wait*!" he bellowed. Without thinking, he threw himself at Fire as the red dragon reached for the stone, seizing him by the shoulders and yanking him back. He hissed a silent scream at the burns that immediately covered his body as they crashed to the floor, and he fought the urge to yank away until he was *positive* his teammate was safe.

There was a clink like something hitting glass, and he was aware of three large axes being released from somewhere in the ceiling. They sliced through the air, cutting the nothingness inches above their heads.

Meadow screamed, leaping back with a horrified expression. Cotton hissed and backed away, her movements mimicking that of a cat's, and Sun froze, wide-eyed.

The blades slowed as the two hatchlings detangled themselves and Cloud slowly lifted his head.

"Everybody okay?" Cloud called, sensing the fear flickering through Fire's body as the red dragon cautiously raised his head to see the swinging axes of death come to a complete halt over the pedestal. The lowest blade easily touched the stone, a reminder of how close they'd come to being decapitated.

"W-what...*what...?"* Fire gasped weakly.

"It was booby-trapped?" Coal exclaimed faintly. And indeed, it *did* look like he was about to pass out. His entire body was shaking at an alarming rate. Cloud momentarily feared his friend was having a seizure, but then he seemed to get back under control and mumbled out, "But I hadn't read anything...Clouddusk never mentioned...how could I have missed it?"

"Never mind," Cloud told him hastily, standing up and, pushing the blades away, wincing at the burns on his talons and legs. "We're all

safe. That's what is important." *But*, came the little voice in the back of his mind. *If you hadn't predicted those axes*, *Fire wouldn't have been.* How *had* he known? It had been like...a vision...or at least a snippet of one. He didn't understand, but, at the moment, he didn't care. He just felt...exhausted. Exhausted and confused.

He slowly sunk back to the earth, breathing a hefty sigh of relief and closing his eyes tightly. He couldn't stop his body from trembling at the pain that pulsed through his claws. "Does anybody have water?" he groaned.

"Sorry," Fire whispered, dropping down next to his pedestal and resting his head against its cold surface.

"It's not your fault," Cloud assured him. "Go ahead and get the stone. I...I think it is safe now."

Fire nodded, slowly heaving himself back up with a wing and shakily reaching for the stone. "Okay," he said, quickly grabbing the rock and passing it between his talons as though testing for any more unseen traps.

"Feel anything?" Sun questioned, leaning in hopefully.

Fire shook his head. "Nothing." There was a twinge of disappointment in his tone as he twisted to glance back at the stand. "Meadow," he added. "There's something over here."

"C-coming!" The little hatchling seemed to bounce back to his normal peppy self as he scrambled over and ducked under the axes to pop up next to the red dragon. "Oh, y-yeah. Y-you're right. I-it looks like a-a message. M-maybe the l-location of the n-next trial. L-light."

Cotton frowned. "Oh, *great*."

"So where is it?" Sun questioned, sliding around to join them. "Is it here?"

"Of *course* it's here," Cotton scoffed. "I'm a Raynbowfalles dragon. Where *else* would my trial be?"

"Um...you do realize--"

"It's o-on...Watterlaek..." Meadow's once confident voice faltered and he turned three shades of deathly pale. "N-no," he mumbled. "T-that can't be r-right." He adjusted his spectacles harshly and began to retranslate the inscriptions.

"What's wrong with *you*?" Coal quizzed, giving the hatchling a scrutinizing glance.

"*N-nothing*. It's...just..." Meadow didn't finish his sentence. He didn't have to. The terror in his eyes was answer enough. "It's n-nothing," he added abruptly, averting his gaze to fiddle with his talons. "W-Watterlaek. That's w-where w-we have t-to g-go n-next."

"But what about--"

Fire's question was cut off by the green hatchling as he whooshed past him and, flaring his wings, took off for the passage back to the surface.

"Um, he *does* know that we can't get out that way, doesn't he?" Sun questioned.

Cloud watched the hatchling go worriedly. "Come on," he growled to the others. "We'd better go after him and make sure he doesn't hurt himself." Without waiting for their response, he sprinted after his teammate.

"Meadow!" he called as he jogged down the corridor, hearing the loud clatter of his claws ringing loudly off of the enclosed cavern. "Hang on a minute! Can we talk?" He rounded a bend, hearing a quiet sobbing coming from somewhere up ahead, and broke into a run. "Meadow!"

"Cloud! Cloud! Wait up!" Coal yelled from somewhere down the corridor.

Cloud ignored him as he turned a corner and found his teammate huddling in a shadow, wings wrapped tightly around his head, whole body trembling from the force of his sobs. "Hey," Cloud whispered, slowing and entering the room softly. "Hey, are you all

right?"

"I can't...I c-can't," Meadow whimpered, sinking further away from him. "I *won't* g-go b-back." He took off his glasses and lowered his head.

"What happened?" Cloud questioned, stepping closer and tentatively reaching out a talon to him.

"I-I never k-knew m-my parents," Meadow whispered. "I...I don't e-even know i-if I a-am a s-sea dragon. I...I can't b-breathe un-underwater, a-and I don't h-have w-webs b-between my c-claws. M-my f-foster parents, t-they d-didn't want me. Called me a-a freak. I-I escaped that *h-horrible* place, and I-I *can't* go b-back."

"I'm sorry," Cloud said, genuinely meaning it. "I can imagine this isn't easy for you, but we need to stick together. You know what Darkwhisperer's Shades can do if one is caught off guard or alone. If the second trial is hidden on Watterlaek, then that is where we need to go."

Meadow sniffed, nodding and putting back on his spectacles, slowly unfolding his wings and tucking them up on his sides. He took a deep breath and spun to face Cloud. "B-but I...I..."

"Come on," Cloud interrupted, opening his wings and herding the hatchling back toward the caves, just as the others appeared in the entrance. "We'll go together, all right? And...when we get there, if you don't think you can do it, you can stay at the portal. Deal?"

Meadow nodded, keeping his gaze down.

"Everything okay in here?" Coal questioned, sticking his head around the bend.

"We're fine," Cloud answered, staying close to Meadow as the trembling hatchling squeezed out of the cavern to rejoin the others. "Did you find a way out of here yet?"

Sun nodded. "There is a second passageway behind the pedestal," he explained.

"Well, then, what are we waiting for?" Cotton questioned, materializing behind them. "Don't we have a galaxy to save?"

"Yeah, let's go," Fire agreed, signaling for them to follow as he turned and started back up the corridor.

"There's one thing that still bothers me," Sun confessed as they began to trek the mountain.

"Just *one*?" Cotton snorted.

"If the second trial is on Watterlaek," Sun went on. "Then tell me how we are supposed to find it when the entire planet's *under the water*."

# Chapter 13

"Well, isn't this just *peachy*?" Cotton grumbled loudly under her breath.

Cloud blinked furiously against the salty wind bashing across his face, and exhaled deeply as he scanned the barren strip of land where the portal had spat them out. The ocean crashed against rocky banks, mimicking the roars of thunder, and a single tree shivered in the breeze, firmly rooted into the thick sand.

"Ooooh, this feels *so weird,*" Fire commented, prancing up to join him, his wings kicking up sand in his wake.

"What?" Coal questioned. "The sand or the fact that it's not erupting into flames?"

"Both," Fire replied. "But *seriously*, guys! Is *this* what it feels like to be able to touch things? It's *so awesome*!"

"Just don't try to hug us," Sun suggested calmly, as he popped up behind him. His snout was wrinkled into something that resembled amusement and the smile was contagious as Cloud felt one flashing across his face as well. "The sand might be immune, but we still aren't."

"Don't worry," Fire promised. "I won't." And with that, he took off in a flurry of sand, whooping and laughing as he spiraled into the air and looped over their heads.

"Well, that's just *brilliant*," Cotton muttered through clenched teeth as she appeared on Cloud's right. "Let's just alert the *entire planet* to our presence. I'm sure they'll be downright *thrilled* to have five unwelcome breeds on their beach. Well," she peered down her snout at Meadow who had been uncomfortably silent this entire time. "Four breeds and a misnomer."

"Oh, let him be," Coal sighed. "He's just enjoying himself."

"Yeah? Well, his 'enjoying himself' is going to get us *all* captured."

"You worry too much."

"And you don't worry *nearly* enough!" The princess snapped back, watching the heavens warily as they progressed. "He's going to get shot out of the sky," she grumbled.

"Careful," Sun smirked. "You're starting to sound like you actually care."

Cotton rolled her eyes. "Sure. Whatever. I just don't want to see us all hung out on ropes to dry when *flame-scales* over there gets us spotted."

"For now, he's fine. And he's still got his stone, so let's just focus on where this trial might be," Cloud suggested, trying his best to be diplomatic.

"That's right!" Coal piped up agreeably. "So, codemaster!" he added, prodding Meadow with a wing. "Where did that inscription say we were supposed to go exactly?"

The sea hatchling didn't answer right away. Instead, his gaze slowly lifted toward the heavens and a deep frown permanently took hold of his face. He took a deep, shuddering breath before glancing hastily at the water and then over at the assembled and waiting team. "It...It w-wasn't precise. I-it just s-said, '*g-go w-where the w-water meets the l-land. From t-there, journey t-to a mountain m-made of s-sand*'."

*"Wow.* Cryptic much?" Cotton said.

"It's n-not supposed t-to b-be e-easy," Meadow pointed out. "O-otherwise, w-we w-wouldn't b-be the only o-ones l-looking." His gaze returned to the sky and Cotton sighed.

"Okay," Cloud attempted to delegate as Fire completed one last circuit and came to flap beside him. "So, 'go to where water meets the land'. That would be here, wouldn't it? I mean, the majority of the planet is underwater, right? So that means there can't be that much land to pick from."

"There are only two strips of land," Coal answered. "Here, and a small island called Nowhere. It's about eighty miles northeast." He gestured out to sea. Even squinting, Cloud couldn't tell what he was pointing at. "That would be my guess."

"I'm not so sure," Sun confessed. "I mean, look at the last one. It ended up being not very far away from the Realm Portal. I think it might be around here."

"Let's take a vote," Fire suggested. "All in favor of going to Nowhere, say 'Aye'." He raised a wing.

"Aye," Coal said.

"A-aye," Meadow agreed.

"Sure," Cloud said with a shrug. "Aye."

"Nay," Cotton huffed, settling down against the sand and closing her eyes.

"Did you say that *just because* we said yes?" Coal growled.

"Maybe," the princess replied smugly.

"That's four out of six," Fire announced, ignoring them. "Majority rules. Nowhere it is." Then, he looked at Coal. "Northeast you said?" With that, he took off again, kicking up another storm of sand with his wings. "That'd be...this way." He started off in a direction.

"Fire, that's west."

"*Oh*."

They flew and flew *and flew* for what felt like ages. A vast ocean of nothing but blueness was all Cloud saw as they glided over the never-ending water. The three glowing orbs of heat cast sparkles upon the waves, making them seem to dance and twirl with every movement. *Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink.*

His eyes drifted from the ocean to his team, spread out across the horizon. He could feel his own wings aching from the strenuous

exercise, and he could scarcely imagine how the others must have felt. Sun looked almost ready to collapse from exhaustion, and they were no closer to finding land than an ostrich learning to fly.

Suddenly, Cloud understood why Meadow's kind preferred to swim. It seemed like very useful tactic for the terrain, and he suddenly felt the urge to run a talon through the waves and feel the relaxing touch of the water rush over him.

One look at the others' frowns immediately quashed that desire.

Instead, he focused his gaze in front of him, toward the dizzying and seemingly endless veil of sea mist. The distant sound of thunder startled him, but Meadow assured him that it was still a good distance off and that, if they kept flying at the same trajectory (whatever *that* meant), they should stay somewhat dry.

Cloud let out a low chuckle. *I'm not sure* anyone *is ever actually dry here.*

Another hour passed in silence before anyone thought to speak. At a rather violent crash of a wave, Fire jerked back, shaking boiling-hot droplets from his scales. "You know," he called to the others. "I'm surprised we haven't been noticed yet. I mean, we don't exactly...blend in...with the landscape."

"Landscape?" Sun repeated, squinting. "*What* landscape?"

"I-it's quite un-unusual," Meadow agreed. "N-normally there are s-several p-patrols here e-each day."

"Maybe they're all on vacation," Coal suggested humorously. Cloud rolled his eyes, half tempted to tell the black hatchling how *utterly ridiculous* that sounded.

Meadow shook his head. "N-no. That's n-not right. S-something's w-wrong." He scanned the waters, as though searching for something.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you," Sun spoke up. "But I'm hungry. Do you think it'd be too hard to catch a fish out here?"

"Doubt it," Fire said, shrugging. He held up his stone disdainfully. "I

wonder if this thing could help us," he grumbled half to himself. "It's been pretty useless so far."

"To catch fish?" Cotton snorted. "Unlikely."

"Well, I'm not seeing much along the lines of mountains made of sand," Sun pointed out. "And by my calculations, it's getting close to noon. Which means it's time for lunch." Angling his wings just right, he swooped toward the waves to eye the water suspiciously.

"Y-you're n-not going t-to catch a-anything t-that w-way," Meadow argued, gliding down beside him.

"Why not?" Sun questioned. "Seems pretty simple to me. Water plus fish equals food."

"O-or shark," Meadow protested. "I-it could a-also mean s-shark."

"Or it could mean *absolutely nothing*," Cotton growled. "I don't care what the lot of you do either way, but can you get a move on? All this *nothingness* is really beginning to get on my nerves."

And then, to Cloud's great surprise, the four turned toward him with questioning expressions. It was a moment before he realized they were waiting for him to give them permission. Suddenly extremely self-conscious, he could feel his scales heating up as he lowered himself to their level. "All right," he agreed. "Go ahead. Have Meadow show you. But," he added, seeing the beam cross Sun's face simultaneous with Cotton's scowl, "try to be quick. We want to reach land before nightfall."

Fire and Coal nodded, swooping down to hover beside Meadow who was once more eyeing the water as though it was about to leap up and drown him. Cloud elected to fly higher and keep an eye out for danger. The sky was nearly cloudless, but there would be just enough covering to keep him hidden should anyone decide to stick their nose out of the water.

*It's not Snowfalle, that's for sure. But it's really not that bad. Though it probably wouldn't hurt to have a* bit *more land. I suppose the sea dragons don't really need land. They seem to do better in the water*

*anyway.*

There was a loud yelp from Fire and Cloud instantly whirled around, searching the blue landscape for what could have caused the hatchling alarm. A collective laugh rose from several of the other hatchlings as the water below Fire's talons gurgled and spat out four perfectly boiled flounder. Coal, Fire, and Sun each swooped to take one, while Meadow had taken on Cotton's look of disgust and had flown up higher to avoid the scene.

Cloud rolled his eyes and continued his ascent, spiraling through the clouds to glide with the suns' heat against his spine. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, giving his wings another pump and surging forward, startling a flock of seagulls and sending them squawking for the water.

*Wait...seagulls? Land! There must be land nearby!*

"Guys!" he called, turning back to begin his decent excitedly. "I think we're almost--"

His triumphant revelation was interrupted by a high pitched scream from Meadow. And it wasn't followed by laughing. His heart dropped to his stomach as he heard a furious roar split the clearing. Hissing and blasts of fire immediately came after, and Cloud's worst fears were confirmed.

*We've been found.*

Scrambling to collect his bearings, he curled his wings up to his sides and slid into a cloud to get a better view of the battle forming below. There had to be at least *ten* water-dwellers, all big, heavily armored, with thick scales and smaller wings. They seemed to peel themselves from the water itself and emerge like a terrifying wall of teeth and talons.

"*Fly, you fools!* " Cotton screamed as she winged it away.

They needed no encouragement in that department. Almost faster than Cloud could track, the four remaining hatchlings broke apart and took off in different directions. The Watterlaek dragons raced

after them. Even with all of their heavy armor, they were quick. Maybe not as much so as Cloud, but he definitely wouldn't count them out of anything.

His eyes fell on Fire as the larger hatchling was easily outpaced and tackled from the air. His howls were lost in a spray of bubbles as he was thrown ruthlessly into the ocean. He was submerged for a moment, and when his head broke through the surface, spluttering and gasping, the two dragons circling overhead came in for the kill, diving gracefully into the water on either side of him and grabbed a hold of his wings, attempting to drag him back under again.

To Cloud's horror, he saw that Fire's scales were functionless in the ice-cold liquid.

And the others were too busy trying not to meet the same fate to help.

*Whelp, looks like it's time for the blue dragon to be reintroduced to Dragnaple.* Oddly enough, that thought was not nearly as thrilling as he'd envisioned it. Granted, he'd imagined it playing out a little differently, perhaps with parades and cheering, and with him as a hero that the entire universe could see. But he wasn't there yet. As far as the rest of the Realms were concerned, there was no Winged Five, and the hatchlings were intruders, and *Dream Realm forbid* a blue dragon actually existed!

*Grrr. Stupid sea-snakes. Had to go and ruin my triumphant arrival. Okay, Cloud, okay. Focus. Fire's in the water, Cotton and Coal are fighting back, Sun is flying at the speed of a comet, and Meadow is somewhere. That can't be good...no, no, fix one problem at a time. Fire. He needs help first.*

Taking a deep breath, he angled his wings just right, and then, letting out the fiercest bellow he could muster, dropped from the sky like a rock. The dragons below saw him coming and shrieked as he adjusted his fall, and yelling, "*Fire, down*!", he released a wave of fire against the murky surface.

The jungle hatchling obeyed, taking a deep breath and plunging below the waves. The two guards, however, weren't so lucky. Still

frozen in terror, they were hit with the flames, and, howling, they dove back into the depths.

Fire reemerged, spitting and hacking.

"Are they gone?" Cloud called down as he circled around and came back to hover.

Fire nodded. "I think so!" he shouted. Then, he splashed the ocean with one wing. "Come on in! The water's fine!"

"Thanks, but no thanks!" Cloud responded. "Let's go help the others!" With that, he turned and began scanning the skyline for signs of the rest of his team.

Fire kicked out of the water with a mighty splash and came to hover beside him. "Over there!" he yelled, pointing off to the left where the faint outline of Sun's wings could be seen against the sunlight.

"All right!" Cloud decided. "Are your scales working?"

Fire gently tapped his wrist and winced. "Yup."

"Then go help him," Cloud ordered, already wheeling to find the others. His eyes narrowed as he honed in on Meadow and Cotton as the two flapped as hard as they could. The four dragons pursuing them were fast, however, and were quickly gaining ground.

Fire nodded and took off.

With a growl, Cloud twisted and shot off toward his teammates. The air sliced nicely around his wings, but he still found himself straining to reach the others. His heart leapt to his chest when he heard Meadow let out a petrified scream. Two of the dragons had grabbed a hold of him and were attempting to pull his thrashing form toward the water. Cotton, to Cloud's terror, wasn't fairing much better. Though she was putting up much more of a fight, the remaining dragons had managed to wrap a chain around her snout, clamping her jaws shut, making it impossible for her to breathe her flames on them.

"CLOUUUUDDD!"

Coal's voice. Screaming his name.

Cloud froze as his friend's plea reached his ears and the pain split through his brain. He gasped as the dreams came hurtling back at him in one massive all-consuming hurricane. *For all the cursed tumbleweeds, why* now*?* He inhaled and exhaled harshly, closing his eyes and bringing a talon to his throbbing skull. *Okay, think,* think*! You've got to get a hold of yourself! Your team needs you!*

*"C-Cotton!"* Meadow's yelp grew more urgent.

Cotton cried muffled shrieks as the guards restraining her dumped her unceremoniously into the water amidst her tumult of insults and curses.

Cloud gasped, reeling back, feeling as though he'd just been kicked in the stomach. He couldn't move. It took all of his energy just to stay aloft. And there, drifting over the breeze, was the hiss of the last dragon he ever wanted to hear.

*"I warned you. You're not a hero. And neither are they."*

*Darkwhisperer.* Forcibly shaking the clinging webs of nightmares from his mind, he violently twisted around, searching for the villainous being. He looked up, down, left, and right, but the hulking black mass was nowhere to be found. *He's not here...he's not here...it's not him...FOCUS!*

He tried taking long breaths. *In. Out. In. Out. Out. In...wait,* what*?*

"I should have known you'd be behind this, *sea-rat*," came a hiss from somewhere up ahead. Cloud slowly opened his eyes, aware of his body shaking violently, to see the owner of the voice, a dark purple dragon, wrapping his claws around Meadow's throat. "I thought you were *dead*. *Drowned*. But yet, just like the urchin you are, here you stand, *alive*, causing me misery once more."

"H-hello, L-lionfish," Meadow gasped out, his eyes fixated on Cotton who was doggy-paddling, struggling to stay afloat. "N-nice to s-see you a-again. W-what b-brings you o-out h-here? T-the q-queen get t-

tired of your s-skulking p-presence?"

The dragon, Lionfish, laughed, tightening his hold. "No, my dear smarty-scales brother. I suppose you haven't heard, but pretending to be dead doesn't do much for your reputation, or your family's. I've been reduced to general, and I received a tip that a group of strangers were flying through the area and so I thought I should greet them *properly*. Never in my wildest dreams could I have expected to find my *little brother* amongst the living, let alone among a team of *enemies*. Imagine how the Queen will reward me when I return with your bodies. Maybe I'll be reinstated."

*To what?* Cloud wondered silently, struggling to think. *Commander snooty-talons?* From where he hovered, just out of sight, he knew he would be safe for a little longer. However, the same didn't hold true for Meadow and Cotton, the former being held tightly, the latter spitting out salt and water furiously. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Coal behind a nearby patch of clouds, eyes entirely focused on him, apparently waiting for the signal to go. And not too far away, Fire and Sun were flapping toward them, having shaken their guards as well. He signaled for them to wait while he worked out the beginnings of a a plan.

"Kill the smart-mouth," Lionfish went on.

"NO!" Meadow shrieked as the other three dragons moved toward Cotton who was still thrashing to keep her head above the water, restrained and unable to protect herself with the chains still around her jaws.

"We've got to help!" Sun called. Fortunately, the water-dragons didn't seem to hear.

Cloud began to nod, but then, something sparkling in between Meadow's talons caught his eye. *Wait.* He held out a wing to block the sand dragon and shook his head. "Hold on," he requested.

Coal frowned. "But they'll kill her!" he protested.

"Just wait," Cloud said again. "I know what I'm doing."

The others shared a glance that Cloud took to mean, *"You'd better."* He did his best to ignore this and settled on watching Meadow as the littlest hatchling's eyes grew wider and wider the closer the dragons got to the princess. The sparks grew brighter, and, as the hatchling screamed out Cotton's name, a flash of light flooded the skies.

With a yelp of alarm, Cloud threw a wing out in front of him. A wall of air slammed into him and he was sent tumbling backward through the sky. He frantically tried to right himself, and even as he did, he was aware of the shouts of alarm and pain from several dragons up ahead. Fearing for his friends' lives, he flipped over and lowered his wings, expecting the worst, to find his team dead and Darkwhisperer laughing manically overhead.

But that wasn't what he saw at all.

Instead of the gorey, bloody mess he'd been anticipating, he found dark clouds gathering all around them and heard the rumble of thunder near where Coal was hovering. *Is that...* His question was answered moments later by a streak of golden light from somewhere up ahead. This was promptly followed by a shriek and a loud splash.

"*Meadow*!" Fire yelled through the sudden blackness.

"He's all right!" Cloud assured him.

"*How do you know*?"

"Because that's his power," Coal gasped, turning to study the squall. "*Quick*! Meadow's the Defender of Weather, isn't he?"

"Yeah?"

"So that explains the storm! He summoned it!"

"I...think it's a little more than that," Cloud said, pointing to a nearby cloud formation. Meadow had just become visible as he darted at a speed that was indragon. His claws crackled with electricity as he slammed into one dragon after another, stunning them instantly, and sending them plummeting to the ocean like

rocks.

"I'll go get Cotton," Sun said.

"You'll need my help to break the chains," Fire volunteered.

Sun nodded and the two dragons took off.

Cloud smiled inside, glad to see them starting to work together like a team was supposed to...like *friends* were supposed to.

"What do we do?" Coal questioned loudly.

"Get closer to the others, and see if we can help," Cloud answered, already flying away.

Coal hurried after him, and they quickly passed through a thin black cloud, ready to fight. The only problem was, the battle was already half over. Two of the four dragons had already gone down, and Meadow and Lionfish were circling warily.

"Cloud! LOOK OUT!"

The warning came too late as Cloud felt a pair of strong talons grab a hold of him from behind and dig into his shoulders deeply. "Gotcha," a raspy voice breathed in his ear. "Ya aren't goin' any--oo*f!"*

There was a flash of movement, and Cloud stiffened as the hold lessened and fell away entirely. He turned, finding Coal dragging the unconscious form from his spine. The blue dragon shuddered, spotting the blind rage emitting from both of them.

"Are you all right?" Coal questioned, though his words did not match his face.

"Yeah," Cloud nodded. "Is he?" He pointed to the dragon.

Coal looked down and scoffed. "He'll be fine. Probably'll have a mountain of a headache though." With that, he swooped down to the water to drop off his unwilling passenger.

Meanwhile, the snarl of fury from Lionfish drew his attention back to his other teammate who was busy ducking and maneuvering away from his brother. His talons continued to crackle, but he held back, remaining on the defensive. And Lionfish was growing impatient at the show.

"*Fight me* you coward!" he roared, striking out with his wings.

Meadow spied Cotton as the three hatchlings rose into the air and shook his head firmly. "N-no. I-I won't."

Wrong answer.

Lionfish let out a scream of fury and lunged at Meadow, who yelped and fell back, beginning to flee. The purple dragon was quicker, however, and was on top of him in moments, pinning his wings to his side and holding him haphazardly over the water. "Fight me! FIGHT ME!"

"Hey! Fish-face!"

Something came soaring through the air, and, as Lionfish twisted to see who had spoken, he was hit in the eyes by a wet, mushy, and *alive* salmon.

"Oh, bullseye!" Sun cheered, doing a small loop in the air, beaming like a maniac.

"What--How--How *dare* you!" Lionfish spluttered, prying the fish away and fixing the desert hatchling with a deadly glare. "Don't you know *who* I *am*?"

"Nope," Sun said with a bolder grin. "You said you were a general, right? Well, meet *ours."*

Cloud recognized the summon and quickly scrambled into action. *This is it. Time to look scary.* He pulled in his wings and spiraled at the sea dragon.

Lionfish screeched in terror as Cloud slammed into him. He released Meadow and moved to grapple Cloud's scales, but the blue dragon was faster, flipping over, simultaneously putting himself out of the

way of an attack, and dumping the water-dwellor to the waves.

Cloud adjusted his wings and swept across the surface of the water to glide before the sea dragon. Above him, he could feel his team waiting.

"Now," he growled to Lionfish. "Have you had enough?"

# Chapter 14

Lionfish growled, but the effect was lost in a sea of bubbles. His eyes moved from one hatchling to the next, narrowing and widening suspiciously, and he folded his wings up to bob on the crests of the waves. He wasn't going to try and fly. Not when the odds were five to one and *not* in his favor. He could have tried to swim, but there was no guarantee he could make a move without them reacting faster.

"You know," he growled in a faintly amused voice. "When I was approached and offered a chance to get revenge on the hatching that *destroyed my life*, I couldn't believe my good fortune. And four other dragons?" He shrugged. "No problem. Dust in the wind. But never, *never* in my years, did I expect to come face to face with a *real blue dragon*." His gaze fell solely on Cloud. "You are a marvel and a legend beyond your years, my friend."

"H-he's not y-your f-friend," Meadow snapped. Cloud shot him a brief glance and the hatchling pushed his glasses up, frowning down at the scowling mass that was his brother.

"Who told you we were coming?" Cloud demanded, whipping back to Lionfish.

The purple dragon only looked at him gleefully. Cloud swallowed back a growl of frustration. "Fire, Coal, go scout the area. Make sure no one's followed us." The two hatchlings did as they were told, and Cloud took a shaky breath, putting on the most convincing and serious face he could muster. "Someone must have told you we were here," he pointed out. "And since *no one here* would have betrayed us, that leads me to the conclusion that someone else found out about us." A gnawing sensation hit his gut, but he brushed it off as nerves.

"And we have ways of making you talk," Sun added, with a meaningful glance toward Fire's glowing scales. "So I suggest you start singing and tell us *just who* sent you to kill us." He tried to

glare menacingly, baring his fangs and flicking back his ears.

"And why would I do that?" Lionfish asked with an uncomfortable smirk.

"I'm *so glad* you asked that!" Sun went on, sounding overly maniacal. "Fire!" he called, raising a talon and waving to the Starrlande hatchling. "You see," he explained, "our friend here was born with too much fire in his scales. So, *apparently,* he burns whatever he touches. Granted, we've never tested it on sea dragons. Perhaps it's time to try." He grinned toothily.

*If I didn't know he was acting, I would be concerned about this dragon's fate,* Cloud realized as he decided to play along. "Have you ever been close to an open flame?" he growled, leaning in closer to the dragon. "Do you know how it feels to be scorched? Over and over, across every scale, every inch of your body." He was aware of the nervous looks the others were giving him. *Yeah, yeah, I know. I hear myself.*

"So, tell us what we want to know," Cotton growled, "or you'll discover just how painful being burned alive can be."

Lionfish paled dramatically at the threats. He'd seemed so dangerous before, when he'd had an army, and he had held all the cards. But when the tables were turned, he could tell he'd been beat. "All right! All right! I'll tell you *anything*! Just keep him away from me!"

"Speak!" Sun growled, signaling for Fire to go back to searching. "Who told you we were here?"

"Some big, black dragon," Lionfish gasped. "Real mean-looking. Kinda reminded me of your friend over there." He gestured toward Coal who was currently shaking his head negatively at Fire. "Said if I killed five hatchlings that were coming through here, he'd make sure I got my position back at the Queen's side."

Meadow snorted and rolled his eyes, mumbling something about thrones and kissing.

"And this dragon," Cloud quizzed. "Did he...or she...say their name?"

"He," Lionfish said. "And no. Just called himself a 'friend'."

The dragonets shared a worrisome glance. "Darkwhisperer," they said together.

"I-it has t-to be," Meadow commented. "H-he's the o-only one who k-knows a-about u-us."

"So, how did he know we'd be here?" Cotton demanded.

"He was a Defender once as well," Cloud reminded them. "He probably knows the locations of all the trials. Which reminds me," He glared down his snout at Lionfish. "we're looking for a mountain made of sand."

"Or a m-mountain *n-named* sand," Meadow added.

"Or a mountain *near* sand," Sun offered.

Cloud sighed, twisting toward them. "Okay, *guys*? I've got this. Thank you."

"R-right. S-sorry."

"Apologies."

Lionfish scoffed and shifted uncomfortably as a wave plowed into his face. "There are no mountains *of sand, named sand, or near sand* here. Just water. And as you can see, we have a great abundance of it. Pity half of you can't swim."

Cloud frowned. Beside him, Meadow's body tensed, and, as Cloud turned to prevent him from doing something incredibly stupid, he saw a talon fly to the green hatchling's cranium and heard him squeak in pain. "Meadow? Are you all right?"

"What? Hasn't he told you?" Lionfish chuckled.

"What are you talking about?" Sun demanded, moving to wrap a protective wing around the smaller hatchling. "What's wrong with

him?"

"Other than being an *insufferable* know-it-all?" Lionfish let out a long-suffering sigh. "My little brother also gets these *super intense* migraines. Been like that since he hatched. No idea what causes them."

"Not that you care, right?" Cotton snarled. "Because you don't concern yourself with *anything besides* yourself."

Cloud inwardly smirked. *She should take her own advice.* The amusement quickly faded, however, when he saw Meadow's expression of pure agony. The hatchling's face was wrenched and his wings were only half-beating. If Sun hadn't been supporting him, he would have fallen right out of the air.

"The...the Shades," Meadow whimpered, all traces of a stutter gone. "Darkwhisperer. He's...he's coming."

*"Here*?" Coal screeched as he and Fire reappeared to their right. "Darkwhisperer is coming *here?* As in, *now*?"

Meadow nodded weakly, squeezing his eyes shut as a tremor passed through his body, from the tops of his horns to the tip of his tail. Cloud was reminded vaguely of a butterfly shedding its cocoon, only Meadow wasn't a butterfly, and he didn't have a cocoon.

"How--" Cotton began quizzically.

"What--" Coal added, staring at the hatchling in curious wonder.

Honestly, Cloud was dying to know the answer to those questions as well, but he knew they'd never have the chance if they were all dead. "Both *very good* questions that he can answer later. But *for now,* we should focus on getting *out of here,* like A.S.A.P."

"But we still don't know where we are going!" Fire protested.

"Nowhere is twenty more miles," Coal estimated with a flick of his ears. "We can be there in under an hour."

"Let's hurry," Cloud said, beating his wings and soaring higher into

the air. "Sun, Cotton, help Meadow until he recovers. The rest of you, fly as fast as you can...but stay together! As for you," he gave Lionfish one final glance. "You should get out of here. Darkwhisperer is dangerous and you could be hurt." He did his best to ignore the fact that he was, in essence, letting a vicious, potentially murderous dragon go free.

Lionfish nodded, and after one final movement to be sure Cloud wasn't tricking him, he turned and disappeared into the ocean with a loud splash.

"Come on!" Cloud called, tossing his head and swooping up to take the lead. Fire fell in on his left, Coal on his right, and the other three trailed behind.

*What happened to Meadow? How does he know where the Shades are? And those headaches? They don't seem ordinary. Are they a part of his powers? I've never heard of mental-teleportation being related to a Defender's abilities. And it's* definitely *not a sea-dweller thing. Is it some kind of mutation, or is he just hiding something?*

Okay, so, not likely the reason. Though he hadn't known the hatchling for more than a week, he was already sure Meadow was a horrible liar, and practically *incapable* of keeping a secret. So, the logical conclusion was, whatever the cause of the migraine, Meadow was as clueless as the rest of them.

"How far behind do you think those things are?" Sun called as a light drizzle began to fall.

Cloud flicked water droplets from his eyes irritably. "I don't know!" he answered truthfully, "but I don't want to stick around and *find out!*" He threw a nervous glance over his shoulder and Fire and Coal did the same. He wasn't the only one who who knew they were no match for Darkwhisperer's entire army. They had only completed one of the five trials. Their time was running out, slipping through their talons like water, and they were nowhere near prepared.

"You seem to know quite a bit about the trials," Fire observed to Coal. "Why is that?"

Coal shrugged. "It just always fascinated me," he answered. "Knowing Clouddusk was real, I wondered if it was possible that the stories were true also."

"And now we know for sure," Cotton commented. Beside her, with his talons wrapped tightly in hers, Meadow finally began to come to. The two dragons did not yet seem aware of their proximity, and it was only when Meadow looked over and squeaked that either thought about it.
Cotton wrenched her talon out of his and looked absolutely disgusted with herself, while Meadow just looked tired.

Sun took it upon himself to steady the water-dweller. "You good?"

Meadow gulped and nodded.

"You know you're going to have to explain this to us sometime, right?"

The spectacled hatchling took a deep breath and agreed, his voice raspy, but lacking the stutter. "I'm sorry."

*Sorry for what? It wasn't his fault Lionfish attacked us. He fought as hard as any of us, maybe even more, just to make sure we...though mainly Cotton...were safe. He may have been the bravest out of all of us.*

And he wanted to tell the hatchling so, but when he turned to speak, Meadow was staring guiltily at the water, and something stopped Cloud from saying anything.

"Fire," he heard Coal pipe up. "Can you distance yourself from us and keep an eye out on our six? We don't want to be snuck up one out here. And Sun, can you do the same ahead?"

"Sure," Sun said with a shrug, putting on a burst of speed and zipping past Cloud to take the lead.

"Like...here?" Fire inquired, dropping off a bit to catch a strong breeze and glide a few meters behind them.

"Yes. Perfect!"

"Perfect," Fire repeated with a grin, doing a little cartwheel for good measure.

"How can you *possibly* have that much energy left?" Cotton grumbled.

"Simple," Fire called. "I'm a jungle dragon. We eat a lot of sugary fruits, which can sustain our need to eat for several days."

"Wow! That sounds really cool!" Coal commented. "What's the record number of days, do you know?"

Fire paused to think. "The record is held by Prince Forrest. He went just under a week, I believe. And that was just on a dare. In a life-or-death situation, we could probably go longer."

"Impressive," Sun said.

"I would *love* to hear more about that," Meadow added, "when this is all over. If...if that would be okay, I mean."

Fire gave him a glance of surprise and shrugged. "Sure. By the way, it's nice to hear you without the stutter."

Meadow chuckled. "It won't last long, believe me. But so long as I--"

He was interrupted by a yelp from Sun as the desert hatchling dropped back to join them and point toward the water. "Look!" he cried. "Is that it?"

Cloud wrenched his gaze off of the endless horizon to follow Sun's shaking talon. Sure enough, there was a seagull flying near his head, and not too far below, a vast strip of land and bog stretched across the ocean, creating a temporary break in the eternal blueness. *That has to be it.*

He glanced back at Coal for confirmation, and the black hatchling nodded. *All right. Let's get down there, then.* With a flick of his tail, he signaled for them to land, and was aware of the many breaths of relief from his team as their talons reached solid ground after so long.

"Doesn't seem all that spectacular," Cotton groused as she flapped down on his left.

"It's in the middle of a planet of water," Coal pointed out. "It's a miracle in itself."

"*Hardly*," Cotton scoffed. "A *miracle* would come with a four-star bed-and-breakfast included."

Coal stared at her as if she'd just sprouted horns and announced herself queen of the Dark Realm. He opened his mouth to retort, but Cloud hastily stepped between them to avoid an unnecessary skirmish.

"Which way to the trial?" he asked sharply.

Seeing the look on his face, Coal blinked a couple of times before backing off and turning abruptly to his right. "This way," he responded with low growl. "It should be just past those trees." He took off into the air, and the others, after sharing a groan, followed.

"Look for a hill or something," Coal went on. "It'll be hidden inside a hillside with strange markings all over."

"So, something like that?" Fire offered, pointing over the treetops.

Cloud followed his gesture, and if he squinted, he was just able to make out the faint outline of a looming object behind a veil of thick fog and seabreeze. It seemed huge, out of place, and highly suspicious. *Just* like a trial was supposed to.

He decided to overlook the fact that the last one hadn't been so easy. He supposed, had the mountain not caved in, and had the tribe taken better care of, it might have been *much* easier to accomplish.

"Yes!" Coal chuckled. "That's it! Good eye!"

They turned and began gliding toward the massive structure. As they went, a rumble of nearby thunder caused several of them to look up in concern.

"Meadow..." Cloud began worriedly.

"It's nowhere near us," the hatchling promised. "It is at least five miles away. It's probably just taunting us. Come on, hurry and I bet we won't even get wet."

***

"'*Hurry and I bet we won't even get wet*,'" Cotton mocked through clenched teeth as she landed loudly under a large grove of Acadia trees and shook out her drenched scales. "*Stag guts.* Have I told you recently how much I absolutely *hate* you?"

Cloud landed a few trees away and rounded to face the others as they came to a stop beside the princess. He wiped a lake's worth of water from his eyes and twisted to gaze up at the imposing structure. A flash of lightning illuminated the towering hillside which seemed to bear down on them and made Cloud feel a million times smaller than he already was.

It was an extremely uncomfortable position to be in.

"Well, we're here," Sun said, trotting over. He shook out his wings and tail, nearly whacking Fire across the snout. "So where do we start looking for the entrance, Mr. Legend-Expert?" He turned toward Coal as the black hatchling dropped lightly to the earth a few paces away.

"There should be a symbol around somewhere," Coal answered as he began to feel along the mossy rocks. "And, like Fire's, there should also be a lever."

"What does the symbol look like?" Meadow inquired from the top of a nearby tree.

Everyone turned to look at him.

Sun burst out laughing.

"What in the wide Realm are you doing up there?" Coal questioned, gazing up at the water-dweller in disbelief. "Enjoying the scenery or something?"

"No..." Meadow didn't answer right away. "B-but I t-think I m-may have f-found our way in."

"Oh, good," Cotton growled. "The stutter's back."

"What? *Really*?" Coal scrambled over, taking to the air to hover beside him. "What? What did you find?"

"It...it l-looks l-like some k-kind of w-writing."

"Can you read it?" Cloud asked, flapping over to join them.

"N-no. It's...it's like n-nothing I-I've ever s-seen. It...it isn't t-the a-ancient l-language. I can't...I can't d-decipher it."

"I can."

Cloud jumped at a flurry of movement near his left and he uncomfortably shifted over to make room for the raynbow hatchling to squeeze in beside him. "You *can*?" he questioned. "How?"

"It's raynbow talk," Cotton explained, gesturing for Meadow and Coal to begin clearing the moss away. "Hasn't been used in *centuries*. Fortunately for us, all of the royal family had to learn it. Throne requirements and such. Honestly, I thought it was just time wasted until now."

"So what does it say?" Coal asked.

"Move those vines aside," she commanded, flicking her tail at Meadow who hastened to obey. "My language skills are a bit rusty," she warned. "But I'll see what I can do. *Beyond these gates lies the crypt of the light. Beware the fear and succumb to the fight."* She frowned. "What the blazes is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I hope it doesn't mean more axes," Fire muttered as he wandered over.

"Look for a lever," Coal ordered. "It should be somewhere nearby."

"Um," Sun gestured to the mile-long vines and rocks. "Do you think

you could be a little more specific?"

"Okay," Fire suggested, "why don't we just let me touch all of the vines and then be like BAM! Problem solved! Mystery uncovered! Cheering and confetti EVERYWHERE!"

"Because, against Cotton's better judgement," Cloud interjected, trying and failing to keep the smile off his face. "We would like the planet to remain intact."

"And besides," Sun piped up once more, "we don't need to burn *anything* down. The lever thingy is right here."

"You're *joking*."

"Nope. Come check it out!"

The hatchlings scrambled over to the desert drake, finding him leaning smugly against the rocks, one talon pressed firmly against the caves. Next to his claw was an imprint that looked suspiciously like a talon-scanner.

"Is that a--" Meadow gasped.

"Yes," Cotton interrupted, pushing past him and rushing over to touch the marking. "I think..." She twisted back to face the others. "I think I can get through this."

"Do it," Cloud ordered, opening a wing a shooing the others back, "but be careful."

Cotton nodded and flattened her talon against the markings. "Okay," she breathed. "So now what do I--"

A crash of thunder interrupted her question and she cringed as a bolt came streaking down from the darkened sky and crashed into the hill. The hatchlings screamed in terror and sprang even further back fearfully. Cotton's eyes widened, but she didn't move.

Electricity crackled through the hillside toward her.

There was a blur of movement and, before Cloud could even think

or even react, Meadow threw himself into Cotton and knocked her away from the rock wall.

At the same moment, the lightning reached Cotton's talon. Meadow threw his body against the wall and forcibly shoved the princess away, taking the brunt of the electricity himself. He yelled out, squeezing his eyes shut and stiffening against the impact.

"MEADOW!" Sun leaped toward him.

"NO!" Coal roared, lunging to grab his wrists. "You can't! He's a conductor! You'll only get hurt as well!"

"But--" he watched desperately as Meadow slumped against the grass. "*Meadow*!"

"He's all right! He's *all. right.*" Coal waited until he was sure Sun wouldn't try anything stupid, and then slowly let him go. "He can handle it. His body will just absorb the shock. That's part of his abilities."

"I don't know what world *you* live in," Fire pointed out, "but where *we* come from, dragons don't sustain being struck by things such as lightning. They *die."*

*"*Well," Coal huffed. "In case you hadn't noticed, Meadow's *not* an ordinary dragon."

Meanwhile, Cotton was standing, looking quite horrified, staring down at the green hatchling's unmoving form. She looked guilty and she immediately dropped her gaze to her talons as though angry she couldn't do anything.

"Uh...guys? *Look*!" A flailing wing from Sun drew their attentions away from the argument to the side of the cliff, where the marking was beginning to pulse with a strange light.

"What is that?" Cloud growled, stepping back warily.

There was a loud groan like a door in desperate need of oiling, followed by a tremendous click, and a hidden doorway swung open, revealing a long, winding, and *dark* passageway.

"*Whoa."*

*"What--"*

*"How--"*

"Um...did I m-miss s-something?"

The last comment came from Meadow as the hatchling slowly lifted his head and blinked tiredly behind his glasses. He slowly craned his neck to stare at the gaping corridor behind him and his eyes enlarged to the size of pools. "*Oh w-wow."*

"Are you all right?" Cloud asked, touching him briefly with a wing as they all gathered at the entrance.

"I...t-think so," he replied. "S-so t-this is i-it?"

"Yup," Coal whispered. "The only question is, who is going to lead us in there?"

They all shared a nervous glance.

And then Fire grew a wicked smile as he turned to face Cotton. "Well, then, ladies first."

# Chapter 15

The corridor was narrow, like a monster waiting to devour them with gaping jaws. It reminded Cloud vaguely of the last trial, and he half expected the roof to topple in on them at any moment. That would be a terrible fate for Dragnaple's up-and-coming heroes, pinned beneath a mountain of cold rocks and lying with the blubbering fishes. He could literally *not think* of a *worse* way to die.

*Don't think about it,* he chastised himself. *Keep moving. It's just like before. The passage must end eventually.*

Behind him, the others tread cautiously. An odd amount of light encompassed Cotton's body, and Meadow's talons still crackled with occasional sparks of electricity. Directly following them, the others walked in silence, and Fire brought up the rear.

*Get in. Get out. Don't die.*

That had been their strategy from the very beginning. After Fire had reminded them how tricky the last trial had been, none of them were looking forward to what was ahead, Cotton especially. They didn't want to be there any longer than they had to. Cloud didn't blame them at all.

A muffled clap of thunder shook the cavern. Cloud stiffened and shot a glance back at the others who had unconsciously bunched together and were staring around the dimly lit hallway with wide eyes. Everyone was on edge, waiting for a danger they knew nothing about.

*Get in. Get out. Don't die.*

It was times like these that Cloud wished Clouddusk was around to guide him. Coal had been doing a sufficient job, but as he had already shown, he didn't know everything, and Cloud wasn't about to risk his team on a whim or guess.

They reached a solid oak door. Cloud eyed it suspiciously and, after a half-convincing nod from Coal, raised a claw to grab the knob.

"Wait!" Cotton hissed in alarm. She flared up her wings and stared with wide eyes. "How do we know that's not somehow horribly booby-trapped?"

Cloud hesitated, retracting his talon worriedly, frowning at the offending structure. It didn't scream *I'm dangerous, don't even* think *about touching me*. It seemed like an ordinary door. *But she's right. It might be rigged. I wish I knew how to be sure.*

"Should I touch it?" Fire offered.

"*No!"* they all said at once.

"We don't know what would happen if you did," Sun pointed out reasonably. "And I think slowly roasting to death or suffocating from smoke inhalation is pretty low on our to-do lists."

"Yeah, I vote we *don't* let Fire touch anything in here," Cotton agreed.

"I second that," Coal said.

"Fine," Fire sniffed. "So then we're going to need *another* way through that." He flicked his tail at the door irritably.

"I'm working on that," Cloud growled, letting his eyes scan the barricade. "I have a feeling it's simpler than it looks. Anybody see a lever or a pulley nearby?"

"There's one over here!" Coal announced, stepping away to reveal an old rope that seemed to be attached to the soggy floor by some kind of anchor weight. It snaked up the walls and disappeared behind a crevice above the door. "What do you think?" the hatchling went on, wings trembling slightly. He reached out to grab it, and, when no one said anything, he shrugged and gave it a yank.

"No, *w-wait*!" Meadow yelped, but it was too late.

The cave gave a great rumble, and the earth shook beneath their

claws. Rocks fell loose from their shafts and crashed down upon them. Cloud yelped as a particularly large one nailed him on the shoulder, and he hastily brought his wings over his face to try and protect himself. He sunk to the floor, grasping what firm foundation he could find, and tried to make himself as small of a target as he could.

Somewhere to his left, he heard Fire screech as something thumped to the ground. The sounds of talons and wings scraping at the walls were deafening, and Cloud guessed the ones who were still up were scrambling desperately for the exit. He breathed a tiny sigh of relief, knowing they would be able to get out. Then, once the tremor was over, he would be able to break out and go meet up with them.

"It's *blocked*!" Meadow yelled.

"We're *trapped*!" Fire screamed.

"Everybody, against the ground!" Sun shouted. "Use your wings! Protect each other!"

The shaking continued. Cloud was beginning to feel a bit like an overused rag doll, and he grit his teeth, trying to ignore the pounding in his skull, and the sensation that his brain was bouncing all over the place and what that might look like. The voices of his team went silent, except for a few stifled whimpers from Meadow, and Cloud could only lay there, listen to the thumping of his heart, and pray the others were all right.

He felt a whimper rising in the back of his throat, and he forcibly swallowed it back down. His wings, and by extension, his entire back, was aching, and he could no longer feel the places where the rocks had landed against his spine. He suspected he was, as he cautiously twitched a wing, partially, if not entirely, buried, and he could hardly imagine what the others must be faring with.

After what felt like eternity, the quaking slowly began to die off and Cloud was able to stop hugging the ground. Taking in a long breath, and grateful to still be alive, he slowly began to arch his back and shift his wings. He paused momentarily at the sound of stones

tumbling, before realizing they were coming from him as he shook off the debris.

Coughing, he straightened up, quickly becoming aware of the new challenge that awaited them. A huge wall of boulders had fallen in next to him, so close it was a wonder it hadn't crushed him, and had created a barrier between him and the exit.

He glanced away, noticing the looming, unobstructed corridor waiting for him. It wasn't opportune, but it was his only way out.

"Is...is everybody...okay?" Sun's voice rasped from the other side of the barrier.

"Define '*okay*,'" came Fire's groan.

"Nice t-thinking...with that...c-call," Meadow grunted. "W-we're a-all r-right over h-here," he added, as though he knew what Cloud was going to ask. "W-what about y-you?"

Before Cloud could answer, he heard a shuffle behind him, and, startled, he turned to find Cotton and Coal on the floor, Coal with his wings over Cotton's head protectively.

"Why is it," the princess groaned, "that *everything* you do leads us to the brink of death?"

"I have *got* to stop touching things," Coal groaned in response.

"You *think*?"

"Are you all right?" Cloud asked them as they slowly began to detangle themselves.

"To plagiarize Fire, '*define all right*'," Coal growled. "I feel like I was just whacked in the head with a sledgehammer."

"You're not too far off," Cotton grumbled.

"We can't find Cotton!" Sun yelled through the wall.

"Oh, *thanks,*" Coal snarked. "Feeling the love, guys. Feeling the

love."

"She's over here!" Cloud called back, ignoring Coal's griping. He pressed up close to the wall, just able to make out the flickers of light when the hatchlings passed. "I think...I think we have to keep going." He swallowed hard at the thought, glancing toward the black hallway. It just *seemed* to forebode danger.

"Looks that way," Sun said. Cloud almost jumped as his yellow snout appeared across from him. "The rocks are too heavy and too numerous to move from here. We can knock them down, but we might pin you all underneath."

"We'll keep going," Cotton determined loudly. Cloud turned sharply to face her and noticed the deep scowl across her snout, as though she was less than pleased about the way things had turned out. "We'll get the stone. You three should focus on removing that barrier as quick as you can. We don't know how far behind the Shades are, and we *really* don't want to be here when they find this place."

That possibility weighed heavily on the group. After all, it wasn't a matter of *if*, they knew. It was *when*.

"All right," Cloud growled, taking charge once more. "We'll get the stone and meet you back here in an hour. Got it? *One* hour." He glanced at Coal meaningfully. The hatchling acknowledged him with a dip of his head.

"We'll be here," Sun promised. "Be careful."

Cloud nodded and bounded over to the two waiting dragons. "We will. Come on." He gestured for the others to follow, and he started off down the hall. Sharing a glance, the other two scrambled after him.

The corridor was dark. Cloud blinked, his eyes struggling to adjust, and scanned the walls. Tiny glowing plants lined the hall, casting an eerie blue shadow over the pathway. His tail brushed against one and it wriggled like a leaf in the breeze. He wondered what specimen they might have been, and was half tempted to pick one

and take it for Meadow to analyze.

After a while, the ground began to slope upward. Cloud was aware of a faint breeze spiraling through the caverns, and he fluffed his wings protectively around him. "Anyone else feel that?" he questioned.

"Yeah," Coal grunted as he tripped in a hole, stumbled, and nearly smacked Cotton with his wings. "Haven't a clue what it is though."

"It's the *wind*, ostrich-brains," Cotton growled stiffly. "You know? Oxygen? Good for *breathing*?"

"Cotton," Cloud huffed tiredly. "Your power is Light. Do you think you could brighten up this hall?"

"I can try," the princess replied. "But don't expect much."

The noise in the halls faded, and Cloud paused, guessing the other two had halted. Carefully, he used the wall to feel his way back to the others.

There was a grunt from Cotton from somewhere to his left, and before he could turn, a flicker of light cut through the shadows, long and thin, like a single stripe across her snout or talons.

"*Whoa*!" Coal exclaimed, leaping back with a clatter. "That's so *cool*! Where is the light coming from?"

The glow jumped toward him abruptly. "It's around my neck," Cotton replied dryly. "Kind of...like a necklace."

"How appropriate," Coal commented, and then darted past Cloud before the dragonet could process the statement.

"Did you just..."

"Compliment you?" Coal finished from Cloud's right. The blue hatchling could practically *see* the grin across his friend's snout. "Perish the thought." With that, he brushed a wing against the narrowing walls and began trotting down the corridor again.

Cloud briefly glanced at the flicker of light that was the princess, shrugged, and followed his friend.

The passageway continued to grow slimmer the higher they climbed, and just as Cloud was beginning to worry they might not fit, the darkness gave way and they emerged into a humongous cave. Here, Cloud paused to blink and take in the sight. The corridor opened outward to a large underground hot spring. Plants of all shapes and varieties clustered around the steaming water, and Cloud felt his eyes drawn toward the heaven, watching as the vapor escaped through the open skylight. And beyond, a great lush canopy enveloped the entire dome, like a mother wrapping her wing around her hatchling.

"So *this* is it," Cotton breathed, poking her head out of the rocky crevice behind him. "It's...not what I was expecting."

"It's almost like magic," Coal added as he bounded ahead and opened his wings to glide toward the hot springs. "It *has* to be. Take the lake for example. The water is above boiling temperature, but there is no catalyst. No volcano. No underground heating chambers."

"Are you sure this is Coal and not Meadow?" Cotton huffed into Cloud's ear, though she sounded more amused than irritated.

Cloud squinted. "Pretty sure. Not to rain on your parade," he added to Coal, "but do you think that, somewhere in your overactive brain, you could find something that could narrow down the search for the stone?"

Coal nodded vigorously. "Of course! This way!" And with that, he took off at a breakneck pace across the lake.

Cloud and Cotton scrambled after him. They glided down to skim the surface of the water. Cloud's tail created ripples in the waves, churning the liquid and sending it spraying away from him. His wings did the same, and he gave them an extra push as he dropped closer to the lake to search.

"This place is very different than Fire's trial," he commented to Coal

who had flown up and had begun feeling along the outer walls.

"It was designed for Violettail," Coal answered. "And while they get along, she and Cyclone are not at all similar."

"Yeah," Cloud mumbled, recalling the dry temperment of the Defender of Light. "I believe it. So where would she put a magical stone in *this* place?"

Coal shrugged. "Well, I'm no Meadow, but I *do believe* that writing over there might help." He pointed to a large boulder across the cave. It seemed *entirely* out of place, and the same kind of writing from the outer cavern was engraved in it.

"*Minnow* wouldn't have been much help here, anyway," Cotton growled sharply, gliding over to the rock to investigate. "It's more writing like we found outside. Raynbow talk." She shuffled closer and began to scan the inscriptions.

"So, what does it say?" Coal questioned as he and Cloud landed behind her.

"It *says*, '*Go jump in a lake, nosey-claws.*' This takes time to decode, and I certainly *cannot* focus with you breathing down my neck!"

"Right, sorry, sorry," Coal mumbled, flapping his wings and backing away quickly. Cloud watched him slip around the edge of the rock to read the lettering from above. His talons fit nicely into the boulders, and, moments later, he was dangling haphazardly from the crag overhead, just feet above Cotton's head.

The princess sighed and rolled her eyes. "You are *really* not helping."

"Coal, come down," Cloud instructed, waving him off the wall with a wing. "Let her work. Why don't you go investigate how the hot spring works, or something?"

Coal nodded, glancing longingly toward the inscriptions one last time before turning and taking off for the lake.

"So, how long do you think it will take to translate all of this?"

Cloud asked Cotton, waving a talon toward the slab of rock.

"Oh, this?" Cotton twisted to face him in amusement. "I already translated *this*. I just wanted to get soot-scales out of my face for a while." With that, she went back to staring at the wall and running her talons against it, searching for a lever of some kind.

Cloud gaped at her.

"According to this," the pink she-dragon went on, flicking off his surprise with an ear, "there should be a button somewhere along this wall. The stone is behind it. Hollow." She tapped the stone and Cloud could hear a ringing noise. "See?"

"Yeah," Cloud agreed, trudging up and placing his fore talons on the cold hard surface. "Pretty cool." He felt along the rock. At first, he didn't notice any deformities, but then, in the center near the top, he spotted a jagged ridge surrounded by a path of smooth gravel. "Cotton," he said, nudging her and pointing to it. "Is that it?"

Cotton reached over him to feel the spot with a wing. "Yes, I think so." And then, holding out her other wing, she added, "Step back."

Cloud did as he was told, and watched as Cotton reared up to grab ahold of the slot and yank it down, hard. The earth gave a mighty rumble and Cloud braced himself as the ground beneath his claws shook. He heard the hasty flaps of Coal's wings as the black hatchling retreated to the air, and he focused on Cotton as the princess pressed against the wall and slid it open. He recognized the power behind her talons. Even though she was skinnier than most of them, she was a formidable fighter and had already proven herself a useful ally. He could definitely understand what Meadow saw in her.

"Call your friend," the princess ordered as she carefully slipped behind the rocks and disappeared from view.

Cloud turned and beckoned Coal who came immediately and dropped hard against the slick shore. "That was fast," the black hatchling commented.

Cloud elected not to respond, shrugged, and hurried after Cotton.

There was a room behind the rock. Granted, it was small, and the single torch in the far corner *did* make it rather difficult to see, but it was enough to hide a stone of extreme power.

Cotton was already near the pedestal when Cloud and Coal squeezed in. Cloud held his wings up uncomfortably as Coal slid by to join the Defender of Light. "Wow," he breathed, turning a full circle to take in the entirety of the room. "This is *beautiful!*"

"*Hmm,*" Cotton agreed with a sniff as she crouched down to investigate the podium and wave a talon over it for traps. "What do you think of this?" she went on, addressing Coal.

Coal cautiously reached out to tap the stone with a claw. "Titanium," he assessed. "Amalgamated with silver and copper. Somehow, it has a purplish hue. Unusual, that's for sure."

"But *is it the right thing?*" Cotton growled.

Coal lifted his wings in an innocent shrug. "Well, I don't see any *other* magic-enhanced stones around. So *grab it,* and let's go!" He jumped away from her and started to exit the room. Cloud could feel him tense as he left, and he wondered if he was concerned about the Shades.

"*Wait,*" he advised as Cotton reached again for the stone. She froze. "Don't you remember what happened with Fire?"

She apparently did, as she instinctively looked toward the ceiling.

Cloud did the same, scanning for any dangerous and pointy objects that might come falling out of the sky. At first glance, he didn't notice any signs of booby traps. The roof, for a room inside a mountain, was rather smooth. There were no signs of inserted axes or any other weapons.

"Do you see anything?" Cotton questioned anxiously.

"No," Cloud replied. "I think it's safe to take. Just...be careful." He watched nervously, breath caught in his throat, as she leaned and

reached for the gem. Time seemed to grow still as her talons brushed the stone and Cloud almost couldn't bear it. He folded his wings in front of his eyes, preparing for whatever disaster would befall them.

But nothing happened.

There was a shuffle, a scrape, and a sharp claw touched his wings. Cloud couldn't resist the chills her presence sent dancing up and down his spine, or the unusually gentle way she spoke as he unfolded his shield at her. "Yoohoo," she chuckled. "Are you just going to stand there all day?" She triumphantly held up the light stone. "I think we got what we came for, don't you?"

He smiled and nodded, opening a wing to permit her passage from the room. She inclined her head toward him as she swept away, and Cloud remained for a moment, stunned. He thought back briefly to the last trial. *Why was this one so much easier?*

Part of his brain told him it *wasn't*, that they'd just gotten smarter, but the other half caused him concern. There was no kind of traps *whatsoever*. It was almost as if...it had been left for them to find. Which was *impossible*, considering the dragons who were supposed to have left them had died over a *thousand years* before, and would have had *no idea* about the younger team.

*So who could have known we would be coming?*

"Hey!" Coal called from the cave entrance. "Cloud! You coming, or are you planning on staying here to fight off the Shades by yourself?"

"I'm coming!" Cloud gave the room one final scrutinizing glare, and then, taking a deep breath, he flew after the others.

# Chapter 16

They spent the night in a hollow not too far away.

Sun took first watch. He had positioned himself between two large oaks, and had settled amid the weeds where only his horns and a little bit of his wings were visible. He kept a silent vigil while the others slept, and then woke Meadow when it was his turn.

Cloud drew the third rotation and was awoken sharply by the gentle prodding of wings against his side. He yawned, stretched, and opened his eyes slowly, nearly gasping when he found the green hatchling's spectacled face inches away from his. "*Yargh*!" he squawked, jerking back immediately. His exclamation startled Meadow who instantly yelped and comically fell backward over his tail.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Meadow howled, trying to detangle himself from his own wings. "I-I didn't m-mean t-to startle y-you! I w-was j-just coming t-to tell you t-that i-it is y-your t-turn t-to watch." He stared at Cloud with wide eyes, and Cloud couldn't help but feel a little uncomfortable with the intent gaze.

"Thanks," he mumbled, pulling himself into a sitting position. He half expected Meadow to leave him then, to go curl up in a corner and sleep, so he was surprised when the hatchling instead sat down across from him and curled his tail neatly around his talons.

"What's w-wrong, C-cloud?"

"Nothing," Cloud answered automatically. "You just surprised me, that's all."

Meadow frowned at him, and Cloud glanced away anxiously. Did he want to explain it to the littlest hatchling? His suspicions? How everything had seemed *so perfect*. The stones, the locations, the army attacking them when it did, the tip that they would be coming, and last but not least, Meadow's apparent insight to

Darkwhisperer's whereabouts. It was all too coincidental, and he did not believe in coincidences. All he could think of was the possibility of there being a traitor in their midst.

And, as much as he hated to admit it, Meadow was looking like the top candidate.

"Get some sleep," he ordered, brushing the drake's wings awkwardly. "It's going to be daylight soon."

The dragonet looked *less* than convinced, but, to Cloud's relief, he didn't press any further, and simply trotted off toward the disorderly mound of hatchlings.

Cloud watched him go warily, and then shook his head roughly and launched himself into a tree, feeling it bend and creak under his weight. He settled down and turned to watch the suns rise beyond the ocean.

Everything was still. If it hadn't been for the lapping of the waves against the shore, he would have said the world was frozen in time. He stared out across the water, spotting a whale surface not too far away. It waved a fin lazily, and then disappeared once more. Cloud watched the ripples it created until he could see neither anymore, and then looked on past the horizon as bursts of color exploded across the heavens. Daylight was fast approaching, he noted as he rubbed his snout tiredly, and then they would have to move on to the next world. It was such a shame, he thought grimly. Had it not been for the press for time and the possible threat of destruction, he might have liked to stay and explore for a little longer.

There was a thump behind him, followed immediately by the flop of wings. The tree he was standing on dropped even further toward the ground, and a flurry of black passed by the corner of his eye.

"You look like you're brooding," Coal commented. "You should do this more often."

"What?" Cloud asked before he thought. "Stare blankly at the ocean?"

"Go on adventures," Coal replied. "It's doing you a lot of good, Cloud. You'd be amazed at your transformation these past few days. You're...different, and I like it. You've gone from a shy, gloomy dragon who couldn't fight if his life depended on it, to a courageous, brave leader."

"Who still couldn't fight if his life depended on it?"

Coal laughed for a moment before his face grew serious. "I'm proud of you, Cloud. You know that, right? You did it. You formed the Defenders. And," he added, nudging Cloud playfully, "they don't want to kill you, so I don't have to come up with a eulogy."

Cloud cracked a smile at that. "Saved you a long-winded and boring speech, didn't I?" He returned the nudge.

"*See*?" Coal chuckled, opening his wings majestically. "Different."

Cloud nodded. He could sense it within himself. He had discovered his purpose, and a group of dragons who wouldn't look down on him for his difference or try to kill him for it. It was as if he'd finally found his niche, a place where he could belong. And perhaps, once they had defeated Darkwhisperer, the universe would see that he wasn't dangerous, and then maybe he could have the life he'd always wanted, surrounded by all the tribes living peacefully as one.

If *we can defeat Darkwhisperer*.

"Coal," he spoke again, breaking the moment of silence. The black hatchling turned to face him in surprise.

"Yes?"

"Where is the next trial? Cotton didn't see anything that revealed it's location, and I can tell that worried her."

"The scrolls say it's on Tundrae," Coal answered simply.

Cloud blinked. "*Tundrae*?" he repeated. "As in, the *land of snow and ice*?" Coal nodded and Cloud made a face. "Well, the others aren't going to like *that*."

"If it is any consolation," Coal said, "it should be pretty easy to locate. Just look for the one thing not made of freezing-coldness and that'll be it." He grinned.

Cloud shook his head. "All right," he said, "but you're going to be the one to tell them." With that, he stood up, feeling the tree quiver underneath him, and shook himself awake. Beside him, Coal scrambled to his feet in alarm.

"*Wait!* Why *me*? Why can't you tell them *yourself*?"

But he was already in the air, heading toward the water.

"*Cloud*!"

He waved to the hatchling before curling his wings and plummeting toward the waves. He wondered briefly if he'd done the right thing in not telling Coal about his suspicions. The hatchling was his oldest and dearest friend, and he trusted him with his life, but he didn't want to put him in any more danger than he already was. If the mole knew he was on to them, he could deep six one of them, or he could melt away into his cover of loyalty, and then Cloud would never figure it out.

*For now, I'll pretend like everything is all right. I'll just watch them more carefully and see if anyone is acting strangely. There is no reason to worry the others. Not until I have solid proof. I don't even know for sure that one of them is bad. For all I know at this point, it could just be a result of my overstimulated brain. But, if one of them* is *a traitor, I don't want to tip them off that I suspect.*

*Until I get more proof, I'll just lay low, wait to see what surfaces, and pray I can catch them in time.*

# Chapter 17

"Let's take a break," Cloud called to the others about midday the following morning. They were nearing a small archipelago, and the suns were high in the sky. The others were beginning to tire, and they needed time to plan. According to Coal, the portal was only an hour's flight away, and he didn't know how much further it would be once they reached Tundrae. They could use all the rest they could get before leaping into the unknown.

"Down there looks like a good place," Sun said, pointing toward a grassy island just south of their current location. "We could land and go from there." His eyes flicked from one piece of land to the next, as though double-checking himself. "And...maybe we could work a little on how our powers activate," he added, with a sideways glance at Meadow.

Cloud nodded, angling his wings and signaling for the others to follow. He cautiously touched down, feeling the grass bend and sway under his talons. Upon landing, he immediately began scanning the barren strip of land for signs of other dragons. The last thing they needed was to be attacked because they had accidentally wandered onto some else's territory.

"Clear," Cotton growled, dropping down next to him. "I'm going to look for something to eat. Anyone want to come with me?" She stabbed the ground with a talon, shaking out her wings tiredly.

Meadow perked up at this and a hopeful smile flashed across his face.

Cloud *wanted* to go with her, but something held him back. Maybe it was the way the littlest hatchling was gazing at her, as though she were a goddess or something, but he couldn't find it in his heart to make a move, not when Meadow had made it so clear that he was interested in her as well.

Shaking his head, he backed away. "No, that's okay," he said

quickly. "I'll stay here. I want to experiment with something anyway." The hatchlings shared a glance, but Cloud didn't know what it meant, and with his head already stuffed full of worry, he didn't feel like taking the time to decipher it. "Er...right. I'll just be moseying over there if you need me." He pointed vaguely off toward the opposite end of the beach. And then, before anyone could question him, he turned and hurried off.

"All right," he heard Cotton growl reluctantly as she noticed Meadow watching her. She couldn't say no. He'd saved her life, though Cloud had noticed she still hadn't acknowledged him in the slightest. "Anyone else?"

"I will," Coal replied, shooting a knowing look at Cloud's back before opening his wings and kicking off after the raynbow hatchling. "Maybe there will be a good dolphin around here," he added jokingly, laughing when he received several hisses of alarm from the others.

"*Ewww*! No! No e-eating the d-dolphins!" Meadow protested.

The rest of the conversation was lost in the wind as Cloud trudged out of hearing range and disappeared back into his own thoughts. He settled beside the water, running a talon back and forth through the waves. He thought about everything they'd learned in the past several days, how they'd met, how they'd already begun to come together as a team.

*I can't believe that one of them could be a traitor,* he thought grimly. *Every dragon here has good reason to be. They all seem to be honorable warriors. Who would risk everything to be a mole? It just doesn't make any sense.*

But yet, the feeling was there. The pricking of unease that something wasn't adding up. No matter how hard he tried to focus, it was always *just* out of reach. Like a fly on a wall, or a fish swimming tauntingly beyond his grasping talons.

The thumps of multiple tails turned his attention from the rippling surface of the water to the two eager hatchlings standing feet behind him. "Uh...guys?" he questioned, seeing their hopeful

expressions. "What...what are you doing? And *why* are you looking at me that way?"

"We were hoping we could train with you," Sun replied, blinking up at the blue dragon shyly. "That *is* what you were going to do, isn't it?"

Cloud hesitated. He didn't want the others clambering around, flopping their big flappy wings in his face while he was trying to concentrate, but to refuse could come across as suspicious. And besides, maybe he could learn something about the two of them that could ultimately rule them in or out of the suspect pool.

Besides, there were three of them, and only one mole. What was the worst they could do? The other two would pummel him before he had a chance to react.

*Unless it's Fire*, Cloud thought, suppressing a shudder. "All right," he grunted, shrugging. "Sure." He retracted his talons from the water and shook them absentmindedly. "What did you have in mind?"

"*Us*?" Fire questioned, sharing a glance with Sun. "We thought *you* knew how all of this worked."

"Not at all," Cloud confessed, "but thank you for the vote of confidence, anyway" He opened his wings and beat them tiredly. He had absolutely *no idea* how a Defender was supposed to use his magic. He'd only used it twice, both times he'd been fighting. "I suppose," he contemplated aloud, "what if our powers can only be activated when we are battling?"

"Hmmm," Sun hummed, rubbing his horns thoughtfully. "Maybe. I think it's worth a shot, at least. But...how are we going to do it?"

"Uh...do what?" Fire asked, staring at the yellow hatchling with wide eyes.

"*Fight*, of course!" Sun answered, spreading his talons excitedly. He leaped back, eyes shining as he spread his wings and prepared to kick off. "That's the way to do it, isn't it?"

"Um..." Cloud began worriedly, thinking of what would happen if

one of them were to accidentally collide into Fire's scales.

"Great!" the desert hatchling interrupted. "Then let's go! I say we do a free-for-all. Last dragon standing wins." And before anyone could protest, he launched himself into the air and began to fly circles around them.

"Uh...maybe we should establish some rules first?" Cloud called after him helplessly. He glanced toward Fire who shrugged, not having anymore idea how to calm their teammate than him. "Like...I don't know...perhaps no life-threatening injuries? Yes? *Sun*?"

Sun ignored him, doing a couple of cartwheels in midair.

"*Ugh,*" Cloud face-palmed. "Fire? Do you think you can help out here?" He gestured hopelessly toward the sky.

"I'll try," Fire answered, spreading his wings and leaping into the air. "Hey! Hey, sloth-brain! Come back here!" Sun just laughed and flew out of reach. Growling, with scales rippling with irritated heat, Fire chased after him.

Cloud was left alone on the shore, which was just fine with him. He dug a talon into the sand, feeling it mold and fall away instantly as he withdrew and curled his wings closer to his body. How could he ever tell who wasn't what they said they were? Each of them was so unique, each had perfect opportunity, but at the same time, he couldn't believe *any* of them were bad.

His gaze moved to Cotton and Meadow across the island. The former was scrounging through bushes for berries, while the green hatchling was frantically trying to scoop a fish from the motionless waves. Overhead, Coal was watching the two hatchlings with a smirk.

"AHA!" Sun shouted suddenly.

Meadow, startled by this exclamation, lost his balance, slipped, and landed in the water with a splash.

Cotton glanced up sharply, scowling at the yellow bundle of scales

momentarily before going back to looking for food. Her tail twitched irritably, but she said nothing as she yanked three good sized strawberries from the bushes and popped them into her mouth.

"*What*?" Cloud called, wheeling to face skyward once more. "What is it?"

"I know how we can do this!" the yellow hatchling laughed.

"Oh, yeah?" Fire asked. "How's that?"

Grinning, Sun pointed out toward the horizon where a flock of seagulls were creating quite a ruckus. "First one to hit one of *those* things wins! And the *loser*," he added, with a wicked grin in the jungle hatchling's direction, "has to tell something about their life."

"No!" Meadow spluttered, head breaking through the surface of the waves in time to hear the desert hatchling's schemes. "N-no e-eating d-dolphins! A-and *certainly* n-no shooting t-the s-seagulls."

Cloud silently agreed with him, but he could also see how the dare could be helpful to *him* as well. "I'll take you up on your challenge," he said. "*But*," he added hastily, seeing the look of horror stretch across Meadow's face. "Not the seagulls. Some other target."

"What about the clouds?" Coal suggested, wandering over. He gestured to several fluffy nimbuses floating lazily by. "Those aren't alive. They won't mind if we destroy them."

"Good idea," Cloud said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Let's do that then. Who's going first?"

"I will," Fire volunteered, winging it over. "But...how do I do this? Is it just like *whoosh* and all my magic comes pouring out, or is more like *wham* where I blow something up in a tremendous display of fireworks?" He studied his talons carefully as though imagining how they might suddenly burst into flames.

"I don't know," Cloud admitted. "I've only seen it once, but it seems to be centered around our talons. It's sort of like...I don't know...a feeling you get. Use that energy, and imagine it becoming a solid

object in your claws."

Fire nodded. He closed his eyes and held out his talons. "All right," he muttered. "I can do this. I can do this. Yeah. *Totally*."

As Cloud watched, a faint red glow began to form around the red hatchling's talons. The air around the team suddenly curved in upon them, appearing as a thin blue semi-circle around Fire, and then promptly erupted into flames.

The hatchlings yelped and sprang away. Sun and Cotton took to the air once more, and Meadow took shelter beneath the waves. Cloud took a half step backward, flaring his wings, readying himself in case the entire field went up in flames. He concentrated on bringing water to his talons, and the ocean lurched behind his swaying tail.

"Fire..." he growled, holding up his talons cautiously. "Be careful. We don't know what your powers can do."

"I *know* that," Fire retorted. "I *am*." And then, opening his eyes to give them a nervous look, he added, "On second thought, you might want to step back."

Cloud obeyed, hopping back toward the water and raising it warily around his wings. "I'm ready," he said.

But even as Fire nodded, the flames in his talons increased, and he yelped a cry of alarm as they burst forward in a single blast of heat.

It missed the cloud and went soaring off into the distance.

"You missed," Sun laughed, reappearing from behind Cotton with a tiny grin. "You know what that means."

"I'd like to see *you* do better," Fire retorted. "But, very well." He settled back against the grass. "A deal is a deal, I suppose. A fact about me...um...well, my favorite color is purple."

"How *intriguing*," Cotton growled. "How about a *real* fact?"

"*Fine*." He breathed a billow of fire and his tail whacked against a bush. "I mentioned I was a triplet before, correct? Well, I'm the

middle child. My older brother, Inferno, he's the brave one out of us. He's...a bit like Cotton, actually. Tough, gritty, and absolutely set on being king one day."

"I didn't know you were royalty," Cotton growled, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I'm not," Fire replied. "But things work differently in the rainforest. *Anyone* can be king if they prove themselves worthy. I always wanted to be a general in King Jaguar's army. And maybe I can be someday. I'll be the best warrior my tribe has ever seen. I'll be a hero. I can be great. I can be loved. I--*am not burning everything!"* He leaped up in alarm, having realized that the bush hadn't burst into flames. "What? WHAT? I'm...I'm not...how...how is this *possible*?" He reared around, touching the grass at his feet, eyes widening when it remained upright.

It was *alive*, green, and *not* reduced to withering ashes.

"I can...I can touch things?" Fire gasped, wheeling to face them. He lunged for another bush nearby. It remained intact as well. "I CAN TOUCH THINGS!" He lunged toward the nearest dragon, that being Sun, and embraced him in a bone-crushing hug.

Cloud started to move, fearing he would see the desert hatchling's scales sizzling from his bones at any moment.

But nothing happened.

Sun, though startled, hugged the red hatchling back. "You're warm," he commented. "Like the Sahara in the summer."

"I've never been able to hug anyone before!" Fire sobbed into his shoulder. "This...this feels *amazing*!"

Meadow heaved himself out of the water and bounded over, dripping wet, to throw his wings around the two hatchlings. Sun wrinkled his nose at the water running down the smaller hatchling's snout and talons.

Cloud carefully sidled over and opened his wings to join their ring. Feeling Sun's scales rub against his and Meadow's anxious shaking,

Cloud realized that Fire might not be the only hatchling receiving their first hug ever.

"Cotton!" he hissed, noticing the she-dragon lingering, but withholding from joining them. He held back a wing, inviting her in.

She blinked and then curled her talons inward, shaking her head.

Fire pulled back from them. His grin was big enough to stuff a cow in, and he nervously played with the power stone. "Do you think this is the reason?" he asked, holding it up to the light.

"Like, if someone were to take it from you, you'd go back to burning things?" Coal asked, landing beside Cotton and folding up his wings as he stared at the rock. "I don't know. Maybe? I guess there's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

"M-may I s-see it?" Meadow inquired, tenatively reaching for it.

Fire handed it to him and immediately jumped back, making sure he wouldn't burn them. Meadow began turning the stone over in his talons, scanning it curiously. "It seems ordinary enough," he decided, giving it back to the red dragon. "I don't think it's what's controlling your powers."

Fire blinked and stared at it.

"So what does it do then?" Sun asked. "Why did we go through the trial get it?"

"Perhaps it just amplifies the power we already possess," Meadow suggested. "A-after all, you've h-had this power s-since you h-hatched, and C-cloud, Cotton, and I c-can u-use our m-magic already."

*That seems logical*, Cloud thought. "Or it helps balance when and how we use our magic," he said.

"Or *both*," Coal said with a shrug. "But I think it's safe to assume it doesn't control whether or not you burn things. See?" He pointed to the grass under Fire's talons. It was perfectly healthy and green.

Fire noticed this and grinned. "Oh! I almost forgot!" He wheeled on Sun. "It's your turn to try."

Sun shrugged. "Sure."

"Uh..." Coal jumped in before the yellow dragon could begin. "Actually, we should be getting to the portal. Tundra is a rather nasty Realm, even in the daylight, and it will be dark there soon."

The other hatchlings turned to face him slowly. Sun twiddled his talons nervously. "Um...do you think you can define that?"

"Think big cats, big teeth, and serious hypothermia," Coal replied, taking off into the air.

"Sounds like a right tropical place to be," Sun snorted.

"Is everybody ready?" Cloud inquired, watching as the other hatchlings gathered around, anxiously twitching their wings and stamping at the ground. They nodded, so he opened his wings and kicked off into the sky.

The Defenders followed him, and together they swept off into the heavens.

# Chapter 18

"Whoever thought living in a *frozen wasteland* was a good idea should be boiled with his own flames, and hung out to dry for the buzzards," Sun muttered, fluffing up his wings and shivering. His slim yellow body stood out like a penguin with sunburn, and his scowl was deep enough to frighten even Darkwhisperer away.

For once, Cloud had to agree with the negativity as he scanned the barren wasteland for *anything* that wasn't snow, cold, or *white*. They had been flying for hours without the first sight of land, or even of *life*. In fact, as Cotton had so gruffly pointed out, they were more likely to *catch their deaths* than find a stone in such a dismal land. And the sudden blizzard certainly hadn't helped their position. The snow had begun to fall as light flurries, and he had found it pretty. It hardly ever snowed on Snowfalle, ironically, so he had planned to continue flying through without a second thought.

It quickly became clear that the storm would not let them by so easily, however, and before long, it was dumping huge flakes, and even ice, on their heads, tremendously slowing their progress through the tundra. What was more, Cloud realized he'd errored. While he was bigger, stronger, and could easily withstand the subzero temperatures, some of the others (Cotton, Meadow, and Sun particularly) weren't so fortunate, and they were a truly miserable sight to behold. Cotton's wings were flapping so slowly they looked like they were about to snap right off, Meadow's talons were shaking and his body was convulsing much too fast, and Sun looked seconds from dropping out of the air. It was clear they would need to land and take shelter soon, or risk everyone dying of hypothermia (and having Meadow lecture them about it's properties for all eternity, which, in his opinion, would be the worst fate imaginable).

"M-maybe we s-should g-go b-back," Fire stuttered through chattering teeth. "A-and wait for this s-storm to p-pass." They swooped down over a hill Cloud could have *sworn* they'd passed

three times, and the jungle hatchling nearly lost his balance, the tips of his wings skidding across the fresh powdered snow as he fought to right himself and climb to join them.

Coal shook his head slowly. "No time," he growled, his eyes darting from the team to the storm and back again as though assessing how much further they could fly before they all collapsed from exposure. "We can't risk Darkwhisperer finding the stone before us. And besides," He swept a talon toward the snowy nothingness surrounding them, "I don't think we could find the portal again, even if we wanted to."

"W-which we d-do," Meadow whispered. He glanced at the others as though afraid he'd said the wrong thing. "W-we d-do. J-just for t-the r-record."

"We can't go back," Cloud decided. "Like Coal said, there's no way to tell where we've been in this whiteout. I think the best thing to do would be to land, wait for it to pass, and hope Darkwhisperer's goons are slowed by the inclement conditions as well."

The others nodded in agreement, and Cloud felt a spark of warmth flood through his body as he realized they'd just accepted his authority over them. Granted, it might have partially had something to do with the life threatening conditions they'd inadvertently placed themselves in, but it was a step forward, and he was proud they'd finally begun to see him as their leader.

"Where should we land?" Cotton yelled over the wind. "I don't see *any* igloos around here!"

That stumped Cloud. Where *could* they land? Everything was snow and ice. They'd freeze faster the longer they stayed in the storm, but they'd be in just as bad shape if they tried to struggle against the snow-packed land. Their wings would get wet and then freeze, and then they would be stranded with dead weights that would only slow them down more.

"Down there!" Sun called, jerking away from them suddenly and veering away into the storm. "I see something!"

"Sun!" Cloud shouted, pulling up and signaling for the others to do the same. "*Wait*!" But the desert hatchling was already gone. "Come on!" he yelled. With that, he beat his wings furiously against the onslaught of wind and took off after his teammate. He breathed a plume of fire into the storm and shook the iced water from his eyes. The glint of Sun's pale scales was just visible, a silvery sparkle against an otherwise monotonous sky.

"This way!" he shouted, curling and diving after the flapping dragonet. Behind him, he heard the others scramble to follow. "Sun! Wait for us!" His cries were lost in the gale, however, and a powerful gust sent him spiraling into a snowbank.

Spitting out snow, and shaking it from his wings, he glanced skyward to see the others circling hesitantly, as though wondering if they should come down and help him. "Go after him!" he yelled, pointing in the direction that Sun had gone. "And *stay together*!"

They took off like a shot with Coal in the lead. Cloud blinked, and they were gone, lost in the vast sea of whiteness. With one swift movement, he shook himself free from the snowdrift and launched back into the storm.

He growled as the snow swirled across his face and eyes, and he strained his ears for the strong whooshes of wings. The storm blocked much of his vision and audio, but he knew he could catch up. *And they flew in this direction...*

He frantically searched the sky, but the clouds were too thick. He could barely see three feet in front of him, let alone distinguish a *dragon* through the storm.

*I lost them.*

The hiss of doubt flooded his brain, causing him to freeze in his tracks, hovering dumbly in midair.

*T hey don't listen to me. They don't respect me as their leader.*

*They did when I said we couldn't go back, and when I told them to go after Sun.*

*Stay there and possibly freeze, or go back and surely die? Not much of a choice, was it?*

Pushing the thoughts violently from his brain, he kept flying straight, for *surely* they couldn't have gone any other way. Sun had flown in that direction, and the rest of his team had followed suit, and so he *had* to be following them, and--

*There! Is that them?*

A dark patch of earth caught his eye and, heart surging with hope, he circled back around for a second look. The ground was covered in white, like a field of sugar. His wings gently skimmed the surface as he touched down. His first instinct was to jump away from the instant numbingness that filled his talons, but he fought the action, focusing instead on scanning the billowing whiteness for the familiar silhouettes of his team. "*Guys?*" he yelled, bounding forward in giant strides. "Coal? Cotton? Fire?" Nothing. "Meadow? *Sun*?" His voice cracked as he desperately swung his head to the left and right, finding no one.

Something thudded into the snow behind him and Cloud wheeled on them. "*There* you are! You have no idea how much--" His scolding died in his throat as he got his first look at the dragon who had arrived.

*That's not one of my team.*

The dragon had *glistening* white spikes, similar to the hue of Sun's, only much *pointier* and *deadly-looking.* Ice-blue eyes burned with rage as he stared down his snout at the blue hatchling, and a growl rumbled in his throat. Cloud didn't recognize him, or have any idea why he seemed so hostile, but he *did* know he was in trouble.

"Uh...hi there?" he tried, hearing his voice squeak away to almost nonexistence. "I...come in peace?"

The drake did not see the humor in the phrasing. His eyes narrowed and his tail lashed viciously from side to side. He did not speak, but he didn't have to. The glint of fear told all the story he needed to hear.

Cloud gulped. "I'm...looking for my friends. Have you seen them?" He opened his wings, trying to seem less threatening.

The dragon stared at him in fury.

*Oh, tumbleweeds,* Cloud instantly realized his mistake. *He thinks--*

The dragon lunged for him, talons outstretched. Cloud yelped as he was pinned into the snow. Claws stomped against his throat and he thrashed, hissing in terror. Then, in one swift movement, he was flipped over and his face was shoved against the earth. Everything around him went white and he screamed, squeezing his eyes shut. He flapped out wildly with his wings, aiming for his attacker's head. "Let me go! Let *go*!"

"How did you get here?" the drake demanded. *"How many of you are there?*"

"Just me!" Cloud howled. "I'm alone! *Argh*!" He was grabbed by the shoulders and talons sunk deep into his scales, yanking him up and spinning him around viciously. The dragon growled at him, leaning in and baring his fangs.

"I don't know what you are doing," he snarled. "And I don't know how you survived, but you won't get away a second time!" He threw Cloud backward and unhinged his jaw with a hiss.

Cloud rolled out of the way of the blast, feeling it whiz past his tail and explode into a snowbank. It was a moment later before he realized that what had nearly hit him hadn't been fire at all. It had been *ice*. "I don't want to hurt you!" he pleaded, flaring his wings and kicking off. He hadn't gotten more than a few feet before he was seized from behind and bashed over the head with a spiky tail.

Cloud cried out, stunned, and reeled backward, shaking his head to clear the light bursting before his eyes. He brought a claw to his throbbing skull and blinked furiously as the drake circled around in front of him and dove once more. Cloud braced himself for the impact. The two drakes went spinning through the air, grappling at scales, wings, and tails, neither able to get a firm hold on the other.

"Please *stop*!" Cloud shouted as they broke through a line of clouds. "*Stop*!"

The dragon either didn't hear him, or wasn't listening. His talons found Cloud's throat and began squeezing. Cloud, in response, panicked. He tried first to pry the strong claws away, and when that didn't work, his brain went into hyperdrive, and everything Clouddusk had taught him came flooding back.

*Begin with a kick to the stomach. That's a dragon's weakest point. Then, while your attacker is busy, hit him as hard as you can with your tail, or whatever else you can find lying around.*

He started with that, and when the drake was doubled over, heaving, the next step of his mentor's instructions echoed through his brain.

*Once you've completed that part, you have two options. Option A is to run. Always know your enemy. If you can't outpace them, then running is a foolish choice that could get you killed.*

Well, he knew nothing about this dragon, but he suspected the fear would increase his speed, and Cloud wasn't a very fast flier to begin with. Fleeing did not seem like a plausible solution at the current time.

*Option two is to fight. Size up your opponent. Know their strengths and weaknesses. Every tribe has one. Strength, speed, armor, or fire.*

This dragon was strong.

He was fast.

He had *extremely* pointy scales.

He breathed ice-fire.

He *defied all* rules of confrontation, and put Cloud at a huge, *huge* disadvantage.

That left the third option, the one that Clouddusk always forgot (or intentionally never mentioned). Cloud's favorite: talking it out.

"Who...who are you?" he inquired breathlessly. "And why did you attack me?"

"Berg," the drake spat out furiously. "Your kind destroyed *everything* once. I *won't* let history repeat itself."

Cloud shook away the encroaching darkness fiercely. "*My kind*," he repeated cautiously. "There have been *other* blue dragons here?" His heart leapt. Maybe he wasn't alone after all! If there were other blue dragons somewhere, he *had* to find them! He had *so many* questions! Who were his parents? Why did he not have any powers? Why had he been abandoned?

*Who was he?*

He wanted to ask, to find out what this dragon knew about him, or maybe where he could find the others like him, but Berg wasn't going to give him the opportunity. A long thick tail slammed into his side, throwing him off balance and sending him careening for a snowbank. He righted himself at the last moment, and barely brushed the hill. He beat his wings and twisted back to face his opponent.

*All right, I've had enough of this!*

Taking a deep breath, and honing in on his inner anxiety and hope, he imagined pushing his powers into one massive ball and it encompassing Berg. Heat whooshed through his body and ran up his throat toward his jaws.

"I'd get out of here, if I were you," he growled. "What's coming next won't be pleasant. Fair warning."

Berg glared at him icily. "I'm not afraid of your pitiful threats, Cursed One. Go ahead. Kill me. I'll have died a loyal soldier, and that is something *even you* can't take away from me."

*Kill him*, came a little voice from the back of his mind. *Kill him* now. *There would be no witnesses.*

Cloud growled, and in a surge of strength he hadn't known he'd possessed, he slammed into Berg, forcing him to the ground and

pinning him down with his talons firmly against his windpipe. Berg growled, and writhed, but Cloud held him there, glaring down his snout at the larger drake.

*Do it! You know you can! You're a blue dragon! This is what you were* born *to be!*

The voice was egging him on, filling him with strength. His mind was blank, but he knew what he wanted to do. He *wanted* to kill this dragon. He *wanted* to be evil enough for the world to sit up and take notice. He *wanted* to be a blue dragon. But...yet...something stopped him. A memory...a *voice*. It sounded so distant, yet, so *familiar*.

*"Don't let anyone ever tell you that the color of your scales determines what's in your heart. It is us dragons who choose who we are going to be, you understand? Not legends. Not our parents. Remember that, young one."*

All at once, the anger evaporated. It was as though the fire had been sucked from his body. The strength disappeared, as did the heat and the whisper. His eyes widened as he stared at Berg in horror. *Had I really been about to...*

*"CLOUD!"*

His head shot up and he narrowed his eyes, just able to make out the faint outlines of a group of dragons flying toward him. He breathed a plume of smoke in relief, recognizing Coal's scales out of the bunch. They'd found him...but...

He glanced back at Berg who was staring up at him, waiting with a threatening expression on his face. He couldn't let the others see him like *this*. He had to...he had to...he didn't know *what* to do. It was too late, the damage had already been done.

"*Cloud*?" Fire gasped as the troop landed behind him. "Cloud, *what* are you *doing*?"

"Cloud, *think* about this," Sun added, taking a step forward and holding his talons out passively. "This isn't you."

He heard the underlining words, "I *hope* this isn't you." What did that mean? Did they *really not* trust him?

*"Cloud*," Coal said firmly, jerking him out of his own pitying thoughts. "Is he really worth it?" He flicked a talon at Berg who snarled and struggled. Cloud let go of him and staggered back, horrified with himself. A moment later, he felt the heat of Sun's scales on his left, and Fire on his right.

"Who are you?" Fire growled, "and why did you attack our friend?"

*Our friend*. Cloud jerked to face him. They weren't angry at him? They didn't think he was going to kill this dragon? They *believed* him? Fire caught his flabbergasted expression and winked before focusing his withering stare on the ice dragon.

Berg hissed, "He's a *blue* dragon."

"And I'm red, so *what*? You can't judge someone *just by the color of their scales*."

"Go," Sun snapped, jerking his head toward the heavens. "*Fly*. Get out of here."

Berg didn't argue. He sprang to his feet and launched into the air. Moments later, he was nothing but a speck on the horizon.

*So much for not being afraid*. Cloud let out a long breath, twisting to face the waiting team. "Thank you," he said gratefully. "I couldn't have--"

He stopped as a spark of pain raced through his brain and he frowned, touching his temple cautiously.

The others noticed this motion.

"Cloud?" Coal questioned, stepping forward. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah...I think so," Cloud replied. He glanced up, tensing when he saw a sixth figure looming over the team. A figure with pure black scales and red eyes. *Darkwhisperer.*

He froze and opened his mouth to screech a warning, but he blinked, and when he looked again, the dragon was gone. "Weird," he mumbled.

"What?" Cotton asked.

"I guess it's nothing, but for a moment there, I thought I saw--" Whatever he was about to say was lost as he felt his legs give out under him and the ground shot up to meet him.

# Chapter 19

"Star..."

He stirred. It was a brief motion, but it was enough to jumpstart the rest of his body and wake his brain. It was a few more moments before he realized he was lying on something soft and warm, unlike the cold snow of Tundrae. He could feel a warm breeze envelope his body, and the gentle lapping of water against the seashore made him think of Watterlaek. But how had he gotten there? Had the others gone back when he passed out? What was going on?

"Star, open your eyes."

He groaned as a wave of pain washed through him, and he gritted his teeth. Everything *hurt*. He wanted it to stop. What did he have to do to make it stop?

"Star! For Dragnaple's sake*, you are safe*. Open your eyes."

He did as he was told, though the sudden stream of direct sunlight burned immensely. He found himself lying in a clearing of lush foliage, and sitting at the water not far away...

"Clouddusk," Cloud gasped, jumping up immediately, ignoring his screaming muscles. "What are you...what are you doing here?" He stared at his mentor in shock, but the gray dragon ignored the question as he stared out past the horizon toward the orange sky. Cloud followed his gaze with a frown. "Um...where are we?"

"You're doubting yourself."

Cloud blinked. How did Clouddusk know that? Had he been watching them after all? A feeling of cold dread flooded him. If he knew about his doubts, had he also seen how close he'd come to killing that dragon? Did he hate him now? Was he about to be kicked off of the team? *Surely* Clouddusk now realized his mistake.

*Blue dragons can't be heroes. It's just not in their DNA. It's not who they are. It's not who* I *am.*

"Clouddusk, I..." he began, but then stopped. How could he tell his mentor that he wasn't the right choice? That he'd nearly taken a life? That he had found a side of him that was dangerous, uncontrollable, a side that frightened him? That most nights he dreamed of the other hatchlings dying in his talons? How would that make him look? Like a nervous wreck or a dangerous threat?

"Do you know why I made you leader?"

"Because I'm the Defender of the Sea?" Cloud guessed, surprised by the question.

Clouddusk stood up and stretched. "No," he responded, turning to face the blue hatchling at last.

"No?" Cloud repeated, puzzled.

"No, I didn't choose you to be the leader because you inherited my powers," Clouddusk said. "I *chose you* because you have heart. You are intelligent, compassionate, and you value the lives of others. You don't run away from your troubles, and you find other ways than fighting to deal with problems. *That's* why you are the captain of the Defenders, and why I am so proud of you."

*Am I dreaming*? Never had Clouddusk *ever* told him that he was proud of *anything* Cloud had done. A war exploded inside of the hatchling. Half of him screamed, "*Yes! I knew it! I knew he was proud of me!"* while the other half more cautiously reminded him of all the ways he'd messed up or had nearly gotten the others killed. And it was those fears he voiced to his mentor.

About the third one in, Clouddusk held up a talon to stop him. "You think you aren't worthy of being their leader because you made mistakes," he said with a nod. "Is that correct?"

"Well, when you say it like that--"

"What did you learn from them?"

Cloud blinked. "I don't think I under--"

"Did you *learn* from your mistakes?" Clouddusk repeated. He turned and began to pace beside the pool. "Being a leader, being a *hero,* is more than just effectively leading a group of dragons blindly. Being a Defender is not an easy path to walk, and it can be lonely, but that doesn't mean you should doubt yourself. What you did, you did to protect your friends."

"But I almost *killed* them!" Cloud protested.

"And *next time*, you'll be more prepared," Clouddusk growled. "Walk with me." He opened a wing invitingly and Cloud trotted over to join him. "I have taught you many things, Star. I taught you to walk, I taught you how to talk, and I taught you how to *fight*. But the one thing I didn't teach you was that *you don't have to be perfect*. *Everyone* makes mistakes. *Everyone* has doubts. It's what you learn from your mistakes that determines who you are going to be. Do you understand?"

"I...think so," Cloud admitted. The water reached his talons and he shook it off, craning his neck to watch his mentor. "But, how did you know I was having any doubts at all? I thought you said you couldn't have any further connection with us."

"I did," Clouddusk answered, dipping his head. "And my reaching out may lead Darkwhisperer right to you. Which is why we don't have much time. Come forward." He flicked an ear, and at first, Cloud was confused, but then he heard the rustle in the bushes from his left, and he swung around as a familiar green figure emerged from the darkness.

*"Meadow*?"

"Hello, Cloud." The littlest hatchling's eyes were gleaming and the stutter was gone once more. He approached the two dragons and flicked his gaze to Clouddusk. "Have you told him?"

"Not yet," Clouddusk said. "I thought you'd want to."

"Tell me what?" Cloud asked, looking between them. There was

something in both of their eyes. It was as if they shared a secret and neither was sure how to reveal it. "What's going on, you guys?"

"Cloud," Meadow gently brushed his talons with a wing. A friendly gesture, but Cloud could feel the fear beneath the action. "We need to talk. The...the three of us. I think there's something you should know. I...well...you see...I haven't...there's..." He took a deep breath and focused on organizing his jumbled thoughts. "What I *mean* to say is, I...*we*...think someone has betrayed us."

Cloud blinked. Of course, he'd already suspected the same thing, but to hear it come from someone else's mouth was unsettling. "Okay? But, you could be wrong, right? I mean, it's all a guess, isn't it?" He ignored his own words, knowing he was saying them for his benefit as much as theirs.

Meadow shook his head and adjusted his glasses. "I'm afraid not. Look, there's something I need to tell you. And I'm afraid it'll change the way you think about me, but I have to do it, or... *a lot* of dragons could get hurt. Cloud, I'm a Dream Leaper"

Cloud's brain immediately began fitting the pieces together. *A Dream Leaper.* He thought of the migraines, the way the hatchling seemed to know *so much* about *everything. Well, that certainly explains a few things.*

Oddly enough, he wasn't half as surprised as he thought he'd be.

"You're the one who pulled me out of that nightmare!" he realized. "Back when we met, someone yanked me from a bad dream and plopped me down in the Dream Realm. That *was* you, wasn't it?"

"Sorry about the rough landing," Meadow said with a small smirk. "Not one of my best performances, I'll admit. But, hey," He added with a shrug, "at least your insides are still where they belong."

Cloud stared at him.

"I'm joking! Only joking!" Meadow chuckled nervously, fiddling with his spectacles again.

Cloud wasn't convinced, but he didn't think now was a good time to

talk about it. "And then what happened? I saw you arrive last with Clouddusk."

Meadow nodded cautiously. "You remember well. When I said I brought Darkwhisperer into the Dream, I meant it. After I rescued you , I found myself unable to jump. I suspect Darkwhisperer was somehow behind it. Clouddusk had to come and find me."

"All right." Cloud decided it was time to circle back around to the purpose of this conversation. "But how do you know someone has betrayed us?"

"I don't sleep well," Meadow explained. "So sometimes I decide to explore, and once, a few days after we began traveling, I heard someone talking. It sounded like they were planning something, but they woke up before I could see who it was. I suspect they know I was there somehow."

"And since then," Clouddusk interjected, "Meadow hasn't been able to get close enough to anyone's dreams to determine who he heard. So you see our dilemma."

"I do." Cloud frowned.

"So what's your plan?" Meadow asked, nudging him.

Cloud twisted to face him. "My plan?"

"Yes, *your plan*. You're the leader. You'll come up with a plan, won't you?"

Cloud hesitated. Him? Come up with a *plan*? That wasn't really his department. That was Coal's thing. Coal came up with the strategies. Coal knew the secrets and all the legends. Cloud was just the one who held the team together and kept them from killing each other.

"Well...uh..."

"What if we used this meeting to our advantage," Clouddusk suggested, "and kill two birds with one stone?"

"*What*?" Cloud and Meadow said together.

"*Oh*!" Meadow gasped, his eyes widening. "I think I get it!"

"I'm glad *you* do," Cloud mumbled. "Care to share with the rest of the class?"

"It's...it's genius!" Meadow stammered, beaming up at Clouddusk excitedly. "We *know* Darkwhisperer can trace us, meaning he probably already has a general idea where we are. And if we *know* someone is a mole, they will no doubt inform him of our next stop, to try and pin us down. But if we *set a trap*, we can catch our traitor and defeat Darkwhisperer *all at once*! It's brilliant!" He adjusted his glasses, looking as though Christmas had come early.

"It's *insane*," Cloud growled. His gaze met Clouddusk's, and the gray dragon nodded, "but it might just work." He crouched down to sketch in the sand with a talon. "That gives me an idea, and here is what we're going to need."

# Chapter 20

The blizzard let up early the next morning.

Fire was the first one awake, and he quickly went about melting the mounds of snow that had built up around the team during the night. His unnatural heat woke Coal, who startled Sun, who tumbled off the top of the heap and landed on Cotton's tail. It was only after a lot of hissing and snapping at one another that they finally gathered their bearings and began searching for the trial again.

Cloud requested Coal take the lead and for the others to fly on ahead, volunteering to stay back with Meadow who had "strained a wing" the evening before, and was flying at a painfully slow pace. It wasn't long before the others were out of sight, and the two were left alone to their scheming.

After a couple of hours, Cloud signaled for them to take a break and they swooped down to a small semi-frozen pond. "Do you think this is working?" Cloud inquired as Meadow trudged toward the water and sunk in up to his wings with a contented sigh. "And aren't you *cold*?"

"Yes, and no, not really," Meadow responded. "It actually feels really nice. Good for sore joints and wings. You should try it."

Recalling his last incident with water, he shuddered and vowed never to be caught so vulnerable again. "No, thanks." He watched the hatchling swim in happy circles. "Are you sure you're not a water-dweller? You seem to enjoy that a lot."

"Pretty sure," Meadow answered, dipping below the surface and reemerging with a bluegill between his teeth. "Mph dosmt make amny smense though." He paused, realizing he wasn't coherent, and took the fish out of his mouth. "If I *were* a sea dragon, wouldn't I have gills and webs? I don't think I'd look like *this*, do you?" He flopped his wings pointedly.

"You could be a hybrid, though, couldn't you?" Cloud suggested, then immediately wished he could stuff a talon into his mouth.

Meadow blinked, and Cloud wondered if the thought had ever crossed his mind. But a moment later, he was shaking his head. "Not possible. It's forbidden for dragons of different tribes to mate, let alone have an egg."

Cloud thought that law sounded ridiculous, but he shrugged, deciding to change the subject. "So, how long have you been a Dream Leaper?"

Meadow sighed, shaking his wings and clambering out of the water, his talons melting the snow underneath him. "Long enough," he answered. Cloud took that to mean *always*. "And if you think I *didn't* hear what I did, you're wrong. I *did*. I just wish I knew who said it."

"And you couldn't tell just by being near them? Like, you didn't recognize their voice?"

"Everything was disoriented," Meadow replied. "My powers aren't exactly...strong. But I heard their words loud and clear, 'Don't worry. I have a plan. And when I succeed, you won't have to worry about those weakling Defenders anymore.'"

"Wow," Cloud breathed, "and why do you think it was one of the team?"

"Who else could it be?" Meadow questioned, picking up his fish. "There are only a few dragons who know we exist, and eighty percent of them are here with us." He began searching through the weeds for something.

"But that's not really enough to proof to say *anyone* on the team is a traitor and...er...what are you doing?"

"I'm going to make a pouch," Meadow answered, "to put the stones in. Fire and Cotton are going to get tired of carrying them, so I thought I'd help out." He pulled out several long reeds and settled against the shore to begin weaving. "Who do *you* think is the mole?"

Cloud hesitated, knowing what his answer would be, but how his

friend was going to hate to hear it. "I think...I think it's Cotton," he confessed. Meadow's head shot up in alarm and Cloud hastily went on before the hatchling could get too carried away. "She's been angry with us since we began, she hasn't had any trouble telling us how much she hates us, *and* she's been around for every bad thing that has happened."

"Yeah, so has Coal. And Fire. And Sun," Meadow protested. "Cloud, just because a dragon is angry, does *not* make them an attempted murderer. And I really don't think *Cotton* is our spy!"

"But that's because *you like her*," Cloud retorted. "Your judgement is impaired, along with your eyesight." He didn't know what made him say that, but he couldn't stop it from bursting out of his mouth.

Meadow's jaw dropped, flabbergasted. "But that's not...how did you...no, no, no...you don't..." He gave up with a long breath and looked Cloud firmly in the eyes. "How long have you known?"

"Known or suspected?" Cloud said. "I've *known* ever since Watterlaek. I *suspected* way before that." He curled his tail, satisfied to see the look of panic stretch across Meadow's face. "Now, come on," he added, opening his wings and kicking off. "You can finish your purse-thingy on the way. We need to get moving or the others are going to begin to suspect something. For now, we'll focus our attention on Cotton, and see where that gets us, all right?"

Meadow nodded somberly, gathering up his things and launching into the air after him.

They flew in silence for a time. The last of the snow faded away to a light rain and then vanished completely and Cloud wasn't going to miss the sheer cold that came with it. Beside him, Meadow flew faster, pumping his wings at twice his speed to keep up.

The air thinned as they flew higher until their wings could touch the clouds and slice through them like razors. Cloud inhaled deeply and let out a whoop that echoed across the barren plane.

"Please don't do that," Meadow said.

"Why not?" Cloud asked, in the midst of a cartwheel. "It's not like anyone is going to *hear* us."

"You don't *actually know that*," Meadow pointed out. "And I for one don't think that dragon you saw yesterday was just a passerby. I mean, *did you see* the size of his talons? They were unlike anything I've ever read about!"

"I saw them," Cloud replied. "I was almost impaled by them, remember?" But still, he decided to let the dragon have a little peace and not do anymore whooping. For now at least. "So, if he wasn't a traveler, what kind of dragon was he?"

Meadow shrugged, finishing his satchel and throwing it over his shoulders. "No clue," he answered. "Never seen a dragon like him. I thought this planet was deserted!"

"It was supposed to be," Cloud replied. "Dragons can't survive in this harsh climate. At least, that's what Coal seemed to think."

"Hmmm," Meadow hummed.

"Oh! Look!" Cloud called suddenly, spotting the glow of his team's wings just up ahead. "There they are! Come on!" With that, he put on an extra burst of speed. With a yelp of alarm, Meadow scrambled after him.

They caught up to the others as they reached an unusually large ice structure and Coal circled back to investigate. Cloud, noticing his friend's sudden interest in the object, flew down to join him. "See something?" he questioned.

"Yes," Coal replied. "Here." He brushed away a layer of snow to reveal scratched inscriptions below. "I think this might be a clue. Meadow! Can you translate this please?" He waved a claw toward the hatchling who hesitantly obeyed. "Your wing looks better," he added, narrowing his eyes in slight suspicion.

Meadow shot Cloud a panicked glance over Coal's back, and Cloud quickly drew Coal's attention away. "So, what kind of writing is this?" he asked. Coal twisted to face him in surprise and Meadow,

looking sufficiently shaken, mouthed a thank you before responding.

"It's Ruin," he replied. "The language of the sand dragons."

Sun perked up. "*Really*? Let me see!"

Before anyone could protest, he shouldered his way in to squint at the markings. "Okay...I give up. What does it say?"

"Excuse me," Meadow mumbled, pushing his way back in and shoving the yellow hatchling aside. He leaned down to study it for a moment. "It talks about someone called the 'Old Man of the North'. Apparently he has the Earth and Weather stones."

"*Two* of them?" Cloud gasped.

"It makes sense though," Coal mumbled. "Sparkwind and Stormtail were brothers after all."

"But wait," Meadow wrinkled his snout confusedly, "I thought one was a sky dragon and the other was jungle?"

"They were hybrids," Coal answered simply. "Their father was a sky prince, their mother, a peasant from the Jungle Realm. They were born before the separation of tribes. I heard rumors of a power stone being hidden this far north in the galaxy, but I have to admit, even *I* was skeptical."

"*You?*" Cotton snorted. "Mr. McKnow-It-All? Pinch me. I must be dreaming."

Coal looked at her flatly. "Can I just say how absolutely *lovely* it is to hear your voice in the morning? Reminds me of a bird I once had."

Cotton stared at him cluelessly.

"Uh...what?" Fire whispered to Cloud.

"Blackbird," Cloud explained. "His pet raven"

"*Oh,*" Fire wheezed, trying to smother a laugh.

Cotton rolled her eyes dramatically. "*Whatever,*" she huffed. "At least *I* wasn't dumb enough to have a pet crow in the first place, or give said bird such a *stupid* name!"

"First off, he is a *raven*," Coal shot back. "And *second*, his name is *not* stupid! He was named after Blackbeard! Terror of the seven seas!"

"A human pirate," Cloud translated again as Meadow began to move along the structure, running his talons across the snow-covered ledges and occasionally adjusting his glasses. "See anything else?"

Meadow shook his head, looking up at him with a frown. "The only thing I can't understand is who the 'Old Man of the North' is," he confessed. "A dragon? I haven't read anything about him. Does he guard the stone out of choice, or is he forced? What kind of dragon is he? Does he just give the Defenders the stones or do they have to pass some sort of test? There is so much we don't know about him! I wish I could get my talons on some scrolls and document everything! Imagine the stories he must know!"

"Books. Scrolls. All *fascinating*," Cotton hissed sarcastically. "But how long until we can *go*? Or are we *letting* the Shades beat us to the stone on purpose?"

Meadow snapped out of his daze and glanced toward Cloud, who received his message loud and clear. *You really think it's her?* He replied with a tiny shrug. Unfortunately, Coal noticed the exchange.

"Okay," he chuckled. "I don't know what *this* is." He gestured from Cloud to Meadow and back. "But I vote we get flying. It sounds like we might have a ways to go, and who knows how long it'll be until another storm comes in?"

Cloud frowned and glanced skyward. He strained his ears, but he didn't hear anything. That didn't mean much. Coal had already proven himself capable of hearing a hundred times better than most dragons. "Meadow, do we have enough information to go on?"

"If by 'enough', you mean 'hardly any', then yes," Meadow replied.

"But somehow, I get the feeling this is all we are going to get off of this rock." He jerked away from the formation suddenly and took off into the air.

Cloud followed quickly, signaling for the others to do the same. "So where are we heading?" he questioned. "Where is this 'Old Man of the North'?"

"Where else?" Meadow answered, gazing past him toward white-capped mountains. "*North*."

They flew northward for the next two-and-a-half days. Two-and-a-half days of nothing but snow, ice, snow, sheer cold, and more snow. And complaining. Lots and *lots* of complaining. It seemed none of his team had ever flown for more than a few hours at a time, and they were forced to take frequent breaks, meaning Cotton would pace around, moaning and drooping her wings pitifully, while Sun and Fire lounged, trying to catch up on lost sleep, and Meadow would roll in snow, the closest substitute he could find for water. Cloud, meanwhile, would take turns with Coal, swooping in wide circles, scanning the horizon for signs of danger.

So far, besides a squadron of penguins they'd found waddling near the water, they'd been alone. Cloud hadn't seen scale or tail of another dragon in the dozens of miles they'd covered. He began to suspect that what Meadow had said was true. The planet truly *was* abandoned. The dragon they'd come across must have been a gypsy of some kind, and Cloud had just had the misfortune of crossing paths with him.

The longer they flew, the more cautious and suspicious he became. Meadow, too, had grown more wary, choosing to keep his distance from the other hatchlings when they stopped for rest. Even at night, he elected to sleep a good ten feet away. He had reduced his trust to Cloud alone, a responsibility that weighed heavily upon Cloud's shoulders.

*What if I can't protect him? Or the others? If I don't figure out who the mole is, how many innocent dragons are going to get hurt?*

He imagined the realms burning. Everything burning, from the lush

forests to the lakes and oceans. He couldn't let that happen. He *had* to figure it out. He *had* to save them. It was his responsibility as their leader to protect them from danger, even when that danger came from within themselves.

"Are we almost *there* yet?" Cotton groaned, flapping tiredly behind him.

"No," Coal answered flatly.

"How about now?" Sun questioned, sensing the black dragon's irritation level spike.

"*No*."

"What about--"

"What about I shove a polar bear down your throats, and *then* see if you ask that question?" Coal grumped.

While they began arguing once more, Cloud ran through what he knew about each of them.

*Cotton seems like the most obvious choice. She clearly doesn't want to be here, and obviously dislikes us. But enough to try and kill us?* He had to admit, he had a hard time picturing it. *Meadow may be right. She is definitely angry, but she doesn't seem like the top candidate to be a traitor.*

He moved on to Fire. *His scales seem dangerous, but he doesn't* act *like a vicious, potentially murderous dragon. But sometimes the best moles aren't obvious. However, I think, if he wanted to kill us, he would have boiled us in our sleep. He wouldn't have kept up the charade for this long.*

*What about Sun?* His gaze drifted to the desert hatchling as he circled the group, laughing loudly. *He says he's a loyal soldier. He would definitely know the kind of strategies needed to fool us. Lots of armies use lying and manipulation in their education. He could easily be deceiving us.*

Meadow? *He couldn't be the mole. He and Clouddusk were the ones*

*that confirmed my suspicions, and Clouddusk seems to trust him. I trust Clouddusk's judgement.*

Coal? *Impossible. He would have no reason to want to kill us. This is the opportunity of a lifetime for him. And besides, he's my best friend.*

That left three possibilities: Sun, Fire, and Cotton.

Three dragons.

Three suspects.

And one of them could kill them all.

# Chapter 21

They reached the summit of Glittering Mountain Range just before nightfall.

"So named," Coal explained proudly, "for the extraordinary shine they omit when the sun's rays reflect off of the snow at their peaks."

*So far*, Cloud thought tiredly as he landed on a small ledge behind the others, *I haven't seen much along the lines of sun.* He glanced up hopefully, but there was no sign of anything except the thick gray clouds rushing across the sky. He glanced back at the others, noticing them limping along in exhaustion. He instinctively held out his wing as Sun swayed unsteadily on his feet. "Is this it?" he asked, letting his gaze scan their surroundings.

A sheer white cliff.

Ice and wind howling around them on every side.

No cover whatsoever from the elements, or any dragons that might happen to spot them.

It seemed like a *death trap* waiting to happen.

Coal nodded, looking upward toward the peaks as well. "As far as I can tell, yes. This place is called the 'Northern-most point in all of Dragnaple'. Can't get anymore *north* than this."

Fire squinted. "Are you *sure* about this? I mean, you got the 'north' part right, but I am not so sure about the 'man'. I don't see any humans around here." His scales flashed orange and red at an alarming rate, and Cloud had to squint to see past the molten lava.

"It probably wasn't talking about an *actual* man," Sun pointed out. "Besides, humans wouldn't survive too well out here. They're a lot like dragons that way." When the others glanced at him in surprise, he just shrugged. "*What*? I've done my homework."

"If this *is* the place," Meadow put in timidly. "Then there should be a door somewhere. And most likely a lever like we found at the other two locations."

"And Sun'll probably find it," Fire joked. He attempted to nudge his teammate playfully, but Sun quickly sidestepped out of the way. Fire stumbled over thin air, but said nothing.

"I think we should split up," Coal suggested. "That way, we can cover more ground, and--"

"No," Cloud interjected. "We stay together."

Coal shot him a surprised look, but he ignored it, not ashamed of his actions. They couldn't split up. That would make it easier for the mole to pick them off. Of course, no one else besides Meadow knew that.

*I need to tell someone. We can't do this on our own, but who could I trust enough to tell? Not the other Defenders, that's for sure.* Any *of them could be the mole. One wrong slip, and we're all dead.*

*Coal.*

He caught his friend's eye as the black hatchling started in his direction, noticing the concerned expression on his face.

*I can trust Coal.*

"What's up?" the dragonet questioned, turning to stand at his side and whisper in his ear.

Cloud hesitated, momentarily unsure whether or not it was the right thing to do. But, he quickly shook those doubts away and took a deep breath. "Can we talk?" he asked.

Coal blinked, frowning. "Of course we can. I'm your friend. You never have to ask that. What's on your mind?"

"*No*," Cloud said, waving his talons hastily. "Not here." He glanced meaningfully to a ledge a little ways down the mountain. Coal followed his gaze.

"*Ah*," he said. "Okay...um..." He twisted back to face the other hatchlings who were waiting for instructions, watching curiously. "Why don't you guys spread out and see if you can find the entrance? We'll be with you in a minute." Then, once the hatchlings had took off, he turned back to Cloud with a confused expression. "All right, let's go."

They launched from the platform and swooped down past a random mountain goat who bleated in panic and disappeared from sight. Below, Coal landed first, and Cloud hastily followed. "Okay," Coal said, wheeling on Cloud and spreading apart his wings. "I'm listening."

"Meadow thinks there's a mole in the team," Cloud confessed. He read Coal's passive expression curiously. Was the hatchling surprised? Shocked? Or had he suspected something was amiss? It was no secret that the hatchling was keenly observant and would make a good detective, but had he caught this?

"*Oh*." Coal's expression went from calm, to shocked, to less-shocked, and then to thoughtful. "And...what do you think? I mean, of course you must agree! That's why you're telling me, right? Do you have any idea who it might be? No...wait...if you did, then you'd confront them instead of coming to me."

"Exactly," Cloud said, glad he'd caught on so quickly. "We want to catch them, but we don't want to let them know that we're on to them. Now, I thought, there are three of us, and three of them. If each of us stuck to a dragon, we could easily figure out who is acting strangely."

"Not a bad idea." Coal shrugged. "But don't you think that'll make someone suspicious?"

"No, why?"

"Look at it this way. If, out of the blue, a dragon started tailing you around and asking a bunch of weird questions, wouldn't you know something was wrong?"

"No?" Did that make him a bad dragon? Would Coal have

immediately suspected everyone? Was that what a *normal* dragon did? "But," he went on. "I don't have any ideas beyond that, and that's where I was hoping your help would come in."

"Hmmm," Coal growled, rubbing his temples thoughtfully. "Well, my advice would be to watch everyone, and then select the most suspicious one to tail. You certainly can't suspect everyone and not be noticed, so I would take the dragon who seems to have to *least* to lose from betraying us."

"Who do you think that would be?"

"Me personally? I'd suspect Meadow. Yeah," Coal went on quickly, as Cloud opened his mouth to protest. "I *know*. You said he was the one who alerted you of the whole thing to start with, but if you ask me, that could easily be a ruse. I mean," he lowered his voice to a whisper and Cloud struggled to hear him, "no offense, but, who is going to pick someone like *him* to be a Defender? Besides, he doesn't really fit the criteria of the Defender of Weather. *A son descended from the very one, bestowed with power to raise the sun.* As far as I can tell, he has no aura of regality to him. He doesn't act like a prince, and he doesn't seem like *any* of the others. In fact, I have never met a *less* motivated dragon. Besides, it's not like you know him well enough to rule him out completey."

Cloud frowned and prepared to tell Coal how he *couldn't possibly* be right, but something stopped him. What he said made *sense*. Until they reached Watterlaek, Meadow had been pretty quiet. And those headaches? Lots of things could have caused them! Claiming to be a Dream Leaper was not the only possibility.

*He saved me from that nightmare.*

*But he is so small, practically invisible.*

*He's a Defender. Even Clouddusk acknowledges it.*

*And Clouddusk is* never *wrong.*

*It* has *to be one of the others. The question is, who?*

He didn't realize he'd stopped breathing until he felt a gentle wing

brush against him and he lifted his head to see Coal there, eyes shimmering sadly. "I'm sorry, Cloud, but I think you and Clouddusk have been fooled."

With that, the black hatchling kicked off, disappearing from the ledge in seconds. Cloud watched him spiral skyward for several moments before he glanced back at his own talons, realizing they were quivering. Had he been lied to? Had he really fallen for a ruse? Somehow, he couldn't see Meadow effectively pulling off a lie, but, like Coal said, he didn't really know him. He didn't know what the hatchling was capable of *at all.*

*Am I wrong?*

*Did I put my trust in the wrong hatchling?*

He clenched his talons and grimaced at a blast of cold wind. For now, he would play along. He would decide for himself if Meadow...or any of the other hatchlings...seemed like they would betray them, and then *he'd* make the final decision.

The claws of despair seemed to choke him and he let his gaze sweep across the barren plane.

*I have to be careful.*

"Cloud!"

He glanced up, spotting Sun waving to him. "We found it!"

Nodding, he opened his wings, threw himself into the air, and climbed back to where the others were waiting, hovering around a small abnormality in the cliff. A small lever protruded from between two boulders, and on a nearby rock were scraped the same kind of lettering that had been on the icicle.

"The Man of the North," Meadow translated, stretching up to read the inscription. "It wasn't a person," he went on, turning to face them. Behind his glasses, his eyes shone in excitement. "It was a *place*."

"But why the ominous name?" Fire inquired.

"Whoever build this place probably didn't want visitors," Coal said.

"And what better way to keep out unwanted guests than to give a mountain a creepy name and make it seem haunted?" Cotton scoffed.

"*Exactly.*"

"All right," Cloud snapped, taking charge. "Someone pull that lever, and let's get moving."

Coal did so and the stones rolled away to reveal yet another pitch-black corridor."Eyes open," he advised, and Cloud was sure he was remembering the first trial. "Meadow, Sun, get ready. This is your trial. Whatever comes our way, you two will have to face it." He nodded to the two hatchlings and then stepped away from the yawning mouth, opening a wing and gesturing them inside.

"Great," Sun growled, his voice wobbling. "I volunteer Meadow for the axes." He shot Meadow a friendly grin, but the green hatchling didn't return it, frowning intently at the cave floor instead. "Hey," Sun went on, pausing to wave a talon in front of his snout. "You all right? I was just making a joke. You know? Haha? There was no need to look so disgusted."

At this, Meadow's head shot up and he blinked. "Huh? What? Oh, I'm fine. Just fine. What're we waiting for? Come on!" Then, without waiting for any kind of response, he scrambled into the cave.

*Well, that was definitely weird.* Cloud frowned and lifted his wings in a shrug. *I wonder what he was seeing.* He shivered. *I hope it wasn't the Shades.*

"Uh..."

"That was...*odd.*"

Cloud spotted the other hatchlings out of the corner of his eye, huddling together near the edge of the ledge. Fire was in the middle, and his scales were apparently countering the sheer cold the wind was buffeting at them. "Everyone okay?" he questioned.

They nodded.

"Then let's go," he went on, signaling for them to follow Meadow. He didn't let them see the worry in his eyes. They were frightened enough. They didn't need his concerns added on top.

"Um...Cloud?" Coal stepped in front of him and held out his wings, blocking the entrance and keeping Cloud from entering. "I think I saw something while we were looking for the entrance, and I'm afraid the Shades might have found us. So," he looked down, fiddling with his talons. "If it's alright with you, I'd like permission to go look around. Just...to be sure we haven't been spotted."

"Of course," Cloud said, brushing him gently in the shoulder with a wing. "Do what you need to do, but be careful, all right? I don't want my best friend to get fried for my sake."

Coal cracked a small smile. "I'll be careful, promise. Thank you, Cloud. You won't regret this. And I'll meet you back here once you get the stones, right?"

"Here," Cloud confirmed.

Coal nodded and leaped into the air, disappearing into the fog.

"Cloud!" Fire called from behind him. "Are you coming, or are we defeating Darkwhisperer on our own today?"

With a long sigh, and a prayer for Coal's safety, Cloud turned and bounded back over to the others, taking up the lead and ducking into the the caves.

They walked in silence for a while. The only noises were the steady drips of melting ice from somewhere in the caverns and the scraping of talons against a cold rocky floor. Every so often, Meadow would glance in his direction, as though silently asking if he'd figured it out yet, and if they were safe. Cloud would immediately look away whenever he did, doing his best to hide his own thoughts and conclusions. He needed to find the truth for himself, and that meant not listening to their theories.
*Cotton...Meadow...Sun...Fire...four Defenders, one traitor. Argh, why*

*must this be so* difficult*?*

He watched the others as they slid through the shadows. What would happen to them? Would the traitor continue to report back to Darkwhisperer, or would they try to kill every dragon there? How would they go about it? He knew what *he'd* do. He'd start with the weakest hatchling and work his way up from there.

*Meadow.*

He thought back to the mountains, to Watterlaek, to the Shades who *seemed to know their exact location all the time.*

*I don't think this is their first attempt at murder.*

His eyes widened as he bounded forward, shoving his way between the narrow passageway and the bodies until he reached Meadow. "Hey," he called, catching everyone's attentions. "I think there's something I need to tell you all."

They stopped, and Meadow flashed him a panicked look, but Cloud ignored it. Better to have five dragons to one, and *know* who the traitor was, then have four suspects and be clueless.

"Cloud," Meadow hissed. A wing touched his talon and he turned his head to see the green hatchling staring at him pleadingly. "*Don't.* Not yet. Not like this."

"I have to," Cloud replied. "I'm sorry. I have no choice." And then, inhaling deeply, he raised his voice to be heard by the others. "There's a traitor among us."

His words sparked a reaction almost immediately. The hatchlings froze, jaws dropped, staring at him in horror and shock. And then, the silence was broken by the question that Cloud had anticipated from the beginning.

"How...how do you know?" demanded Sun. "And why are you *just now* telling us?"

"Because I wasn't sure about it myself, until now," Cloud answered. "A dragon came to me recently with his concerns." He decided to

make it easier on Meadow and leave his super dream abilities out of his answer. That was his secret, and his to disclose, when he was ready. "He had reason to believe that one of us here is a spy for Darkwhisperer."

"*What*?" Fire screeched.

"NO!" Cotton hissed. She swung to her left and right, growling at the dragons on either side. "Which of you would be so much of an *bumbling idiot* to be the traitor? Step forward now so I can *rip out* your throat and *stuff* you!" Her tail lashed menacingly.

"Well, it's certainly *not me*!" Sun yelped, jumping away, looking alarmed at the gruesomeness of her threat.

Even though his scales were literally made of heat, Fire seemed to melt beneath the princess's deadly gaze. "Oh, *come on*! You don't think it's *me* do you? That makes *absolutely* no sense! Think about it! How could *I* be the traitor? I can't touch anything without literally setting it on fire! I couldn't have told Lionfish about us, and I was with you the entire time, so I wouldn't have had a chance to warn them of *anything*!"

*He's right*, Cloud realized with a jolt. *He couldn't have alerted Lionfish, just like he couldn't have caused that cave-in, and he wouldn't have nearly killed himself to get his stone if he was the mole.*

"Well, who does that leave?" Cotton growled. "If it's not me, or you, or Sun, then that only leaves one, doesn't it?"

"*Meadow*," Sun growled, gaze snapping to the little dragon and then back again. "You can't be serious! You think--"

"*Me*?" Meadow squawked. "You think *I'm* the snitch? No!"

"Why not?" Cotton snapped. "You are obviously hiding *something*. Dragons *like you* don't just *get* chosen to be heroes. Plus, weren't you the one who *just happened* to know where the Shades were when we were on Watterlaek? We don't know *anything* about you. You could easily be the mole!"

*Who is going to pick someone like him to be a Defender?* Coal's words

flooded Cloud's brain. He shook it away forcibly, angry at himself for thinking something so mean.

"But I'm...I'm *not*!"

"Sorry," Fire said, staring at him apologetically, "but how can *we* know that? Right now, everything is pointing to you."

"Because..." Meadow cringed back, hesitating. And then, he closed his eyes and blurted, "Because *I'm* the one who told Cloud in the first place! I'm a Dream Leaper, okay? That's how I know! Someone in this room *has* betrayed us, but it isn't *me*!"

*"You*? A Dream Leaper?" Cotton snorted disdainfully. "The most powerful of all dragons? *Doubtful.*"

"It's true," Cloud cut in, stepping in to the argument. "I've seen him."

"So that leaves *you,*" Sun pointed out, "but since you told us, it only makes sense that you're clean."

"So we're out of options," Cotton growled. "Meaning *someone* is lying."

*Who had access to everything that went wrong? Who would have motive to want to kill us, or help Darkwhisperer?* If he was being truthful with himself, none of them really seemed like good candidates. Each had a logical, plausible reasoning for why they *weren't* the mole. Nothing they had said, or the way they'd said it, had given any indication of wrong-doing. They were just as confused and angry as he was.

"I'm telling the truth!" Sun growled. "I don't know who the mole is, and you can stop looking at me like you want to turn me into a piece of toast because *I am not the bad guy!"*

"What if it's someone not in this cave?" Fire thought aloud. "What if someone just happened to see us and then reported back to Darkwhisperer? What if *none of us* are the bad guy?"

"That's ridiculous," Cotton growled. "Someone who got lucky enough to see us, even from the air, couldn't have known that we

were Defenders! It's not like we openly used our powers in the presence of others!"

"But if it wasn't some random dragon," Meadow whispered. "And it *wasn't* one of us, that only leaves one option, doesn't it?" He looked at the others who were nodding in agreement.

Cloud was lost. "Wait, who are we talking about? What do you all know that I don't?"

"There was only one dragon who knew everything about us," Fire explained.

"One dragon who could have predicted our movements, and has known where we were going," Sun added.

"One dragon who could have pulled this entire thing off without any of us knowing," Cotton growled.

"Correct," came a voice from behind them. "And that dragon...is *me*."

# Chapter 22

"I must congratulate you on your efforts," Coal chuckled. "I anticipated it would take you *much* longer to riddle it out."

Cloud felt his team slide defensively into position behind him, and he felt himself freeze up entirely. His brain whirled at a million miles per hour, desperately trying to find another solution, another reason for what he was seeing, but it continued to circle back to the same conclusion.

"*You*," he gasped, hearing his voice tremble in disbelief.

Coal smirked. "Me." Then, seeing the horrified expression on the blue hatchling's face, he went on, "Oh, come on, Star, don't look so *surprised. Surely* you must have *known*, somewhere *deep inside of you*, that we'd end up here sooner or later." He turned slightly, flicking his tail to the unseen creatures in the shadows. "*Take them*."

From the crevices in the ceiling and from the ground, dark shapes oozed to the surface. Spine-chilling hisses flooded the caverns as dozens of Shades materialized from the darkness on both sides of the team, pinning them in, purple eyes glowing hungrily.

"Brace yourselves," Cloud growled, dropping into a defensive stance, feeling Cotton and Sun do the same on either side of his wings. "Defend each other, and remember, only our powers can destroy these things." His mind flashed through everything Clouddusk had ever taught him about numerous enemies. *This used to be something Coal and I did together*, he thought with a jolt. *But now, it's with a whole team of strangers.*

*Not strangers,* he corrected himself. *A team.*

*My team.*

*We didn't come this far to lose now.*

"GO!" he bellowed, lunging at the closest Shade and sending them both tumbling to the ground. His actions seemed to be a switch for the rest of the hall, and even as he hit the floor, he could hear the screeches and hissing rising from the tumult.

The creature below him snarled and writhed, but it did not take long for Cloud to build up enough anger to blast it to smithereens with the water from his talons. He watched it melt away like ice, momentarily transfixed, and then snapped out of his daze to spot Coal stalking back and forth across the hall. He rose to his feet hastily, and readied himself to move, blasting two more monsters to nonexistence as he went.

"I'm going after Coal!" he yelled to the others before breaking away and pushing through the onslaught of Shades. He felt claws rake at his scales, and talons try and drag him down into the depths, but he pushed them aside and kept going.

*This fight is going to end before it's started.*

*Coal is not going to get away with this.*

*He won't get the best of me again.*

*He's shown his true colors. I know the truth now.*

*We aren't hatchlings anymore.*

He thought back to when they were newborns, only a year or two old. Play-fighting side by side until they collapsed from exhaustion under a shady willow, laughing manically.

*"You're my best friend," Cloud whispered, glancing over at Coal who had flopped onto his back next to him.*

*"And you're mine," Coal replied, opening a wing and holding it out to him.*

*"I don't understand why," Cloud confessed, rolling to face him. "Why do you want to be friends with me? No one wants to be friends with me." He looked down at his talons in disgust. "They're all afraid. I don't understand why they all hate me."*

*Coal sat up at this. "They don't hate you."*

*"Yeah, they do," Cloud replied, sitting up too, and wrapping his wings around himself with a shudder. "Daddy told me. He said 'You can't go to the village. The dragons there...they don't understand you. They aren't like me.'"*

*"Wow," Coal breathed. "I can't* imagine *what it must be like to be you." He read Cloud's downcast expression. "Don't let it get to you," he advised. "You aren't anything those other dragons think you are."*

*Cloud dared to look at him. "You really think so?"*

*"Sure," Coal replied. "You're my brother, aren't you?" He nudged him playfully in the side. "And us brothers gotta stick together, right?"*

*"Yeah." Cloud hissed out a breath of relief. He curled closer to the black hatchling. "You're the best big brother ever."*

*Coal held him in his wings. "Don't worry, Cloud," he murmured as the blue drake began to fall asleep. "One day, you'll get your chance to make a mark on the world. You'll show them what a blue dragon can really do. I know you will."*

And he had done just that. He'd proven that his kind were not all bad.

More importantly, he'd proven that you couldn't judge a dragon by appearances. Blue dragons weren't necessarily bad, and bigger, more heroic dragons weren't always good.

He was only feet from Coal when three Shades simultaneously leapt at him, grabbing ahold of his wings and yanking him against the ground with their combined weights. Two settled on his wings, and a third on his tail, pinning him against the rocks. He growled, thrashing wildly.

"I'm sure by now you've realized the irony of the situation," Coal sneered as he stepped forward into the light, eyes gleaming, looking red in the torch-light. "Your team is surrounded. Darkwhisperer will be here shortly, and that will end the epic tale of Dragnaple's *mightiest heroes. A pity* they couldn't work together. Oh, don't worry

Cloud, I'll be sure to make your story end spectacularly. *Blue dragon goes insane and kills his teammates. The only dragons who ever gave him a chance.* Perfect, don't you agree? And, centuries from now, when they find your bodies, they'll just restate what I have been trying to prove all along. After all, who would expect *anything else* from a blue dragon?"

He glanced up with a sickening grin. "*Finish them*," he snapped.

"*No*!" Cloud howled, straining against his captors desperately. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the Shades pressing in, sprouting from the depths of the rocks, backing his team toward the walls. The hatchlings were still fighting, but they were running out of time and space. "Coal!" he choked desperately. "I don't know why you're doing this! But if you're being controlled, we can help you!"

Coal laughed. "*Help me*?" he sneered. "You can't *help me.* You don't understand what you are dealing with! No one is forcing *me* to do anything!" He snapped open his wings boastfully. "You *still don't get it*, do you? Even after all this time, you don't know *who I am. I* am the heir of night, Star. *Do you understand?* Your precious prophecy was wrong. There is no *heir of thunder and night*. There is only me. And there is only you."

*Night.*

*Coal Night.*

*Dark Night.*

"You're *Darkwhisperer's son*?" Cloud wheezed, eyes widening as the last of the pieces fell into their proper places.

"Oh, *gold star* for the Defender!" Coal cackled. "You have *no idea* how awful it was to be *nice* for the past nineteen years. Learning how to be *kind* and compassionate. BLECH. I wanted to stab out my eyes so many times, and I almost did. I couldn't take *one more day* of such weakness. But do you know how I got through each day, how I put up with Clouddusk's *stupid* lectures on *heroes* and *doing the right thing?* I thought of *you,* Cloud. The way you idolized me. How *desperately* you wanted to be *just like* me. But let's face it." He

shrugged, smirking. "The prophecy may say you're a hero, but you'll *never* be what the universe needs to survive. *Any* of you." His eyes turned on the other hatchlings as they continued to struggle. "A bunch of nobodies. That's all you are. *Outcasts*."

Cloud closed his eyes, summoning all of his powers toward his chest. If he could shoot water from his talons, maybe it could work the same as fire. He felt the power building inside of him and he imagined it forming into a single blast. He opened his eyes and followed Coal's movements. *If I could just get a clean shot...*

Coal watched him, and Cloud worried that he'd guessed what he was planning to do. "Now, you see, Star, I have a dilemma," the black hatchling growled, beginning his pacing once more. "I personally would love *nothing more* than to break your neck right here and now and be done with it, because *I know* you're too dangerous to live. However," he went on, "my father thinks differently. He *believes* there might be a use for you yet. Says *even a Defender* can be persuaded for the right price."

"Let him stand," he ordered, gesturing boredly to his Shades, and they begrudgingly backed away, leaving Cloud to struggle to his feet, wincing as he adjusted his wings and folded them back against his sides. "I'm going to give you a chance. One. And how you answer will determine how many of you walk out of here alive." He flicked his ears, silently commanding his monsters to back off from the rest of the team, who twisted to face him, bewildered.

Cotton growled, light sparkling around her fangs.

"Say no, Cloud!" Meadow yelled as he detached himself from a stalactite. "We can make it out of here without any kind of deal!"

"*You*," Coal snarled, his head snaking around to glare at the green hatchling. "Shut up. *No one* asked you, you *insufferable* nerd. Be *grateful* I'm giving you this opportunity at all. *Now*, Cloud. What would it take for you to leave this foolish dream of grandeur behind?"

"I won't help you," Cloud growled firmly.

"Oh, really?" Coal sneered. "What about for a chance at *freedom*?" He stepped forward until he and Cloud were almost nose to nose. Cloud struggled to stand up straight as Coal leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "All those dragons who fear you, who *despise* you for what you are, I could make them *love* you. You could walk among them. You could have a *normal* life, just like everybody else."

*Freedom?* Cloud thought. *I could be normal? Live a normal life? Even with my blue scales?*

*Yes! Take it!* A part of his brain screamed. *This is what you've always wanted! You could be an ordinary dragon! Forget this crazy, suicide mission and take the lifeline that's been offered to you!*

*Say yes! This is what you've always wanted. You can still be a hero, even without being a Defender. Dragons do it all the time! So, just say yes, and everyone can walk away from this, and no one has to get hurt. Isn't that the right choice to make? Isn't that what Clouddusk would do?*

*Say yes!*

He opened his mouth, feeling his powers churning once more. He closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply.

"Well?" Coal demanded.

Cloud opened his eyes and fixed his gaze firmly on Coal's. "*No*."

And then he blasted the hatchling squarely in the face.

Coal shrieked and fell backward as the wave of watery light drove into him. He let out a ball of fire as he fell, which struck Cloud in the face, sending him staggering away with a roar of pain. Disoriented, he smacked into a stalagmite and leaped away, hissing.

All around him, the Shades flickered and crumbled like shattered glass, Coal's hold on their forms broken. Fire bashed through the last of the creatures with his wings, and landed with a hard thump behind Coal, grabbing the hatchling and hoisting him into the air non-to-gently, ignoring his screams of pain as his scales sizzled.

"I think that about does it for Mr. Treacherous-claws here," he

growled. "You all right?" he asked.

"*No*," Coal whimpered.

"I wasn't talking to *you*," Fire snapped. "Cloud?"

Cloud blinked multiple times, gasping as the world blurred around him. "I...I think so," he answered, rubbing his sore head, feeling a bump where he had collided with the cave wall.

"Here." Sun's voice was audible on his right. "Fire...*Fire*, let me...yes...we're *not* trying to incinerate him. *I will take him now*. Thank you." The heat of his scales found Cloud and he relaxed slightly, knowing Coal was safe, but tightly restrained.

Cloud shook his head. *Now* everything was gray. His eyes were burning. They felt like they were on fire. Color was seeping away, almost as if it was water slipping between his talons. He closed his eyes with a groan, but the pain continued, throbbing all the way into his skull.

*Water,* he thought weakly. *I need water.*

He staggered, blindly reaching for the wall, or something to grab a hold of. Instead, he tripped over an uneven patch of rocks and landed in someone's talons.

"*Whoa*!" Cotton exclaimed, quickly shoving him back up. "Easy there, tiger! Are you sure you're okay?" She didn't sound angry, but she did seem concerned. It was such an unusual tone for her, that Cloud nearly fell over *again* from shock.

"I can't...I can't see," Cloud whimpered. Panic flashed through him as he heard himself speak. "Cotton, *I can't see*!"

"Okay, *okay*." Her voice rose in alarm. "It's going to be fine! We'll have Meadow check you over. You're going to be okay, Cloud." That was the first time she'd ever called Meadow by his real name.

*It must be worse than I thought,* Cloud realized. He tensed, hearing talons scrambling toward him, and he braced himself to swing at another attacker.

*"Whoa*!" Meadow yelped. "Don't fire! It's me, Cloud! It's *me!* I'm going to wave a claw in front of your face now. Let me know when you see it."

"Meadow?" Cloud whispered hoarsely. "W-where are you?"

An uncomfortable silence filled the hall. It was broken moments later by a hiss of fury and a startled yelp.

"WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?" Fire roared.

"I--I don't *know*!" Coal yelped, terrified. Clearly, *even he* wasn't dumb enough to get on Fire's bad side.

"WHERE ARE THE STONES, YOU LYING, CONNIVING, PITIFUL EXCUSE FOR A DRAGON?"

"*Fire*..." Cloud groaned, flinching at the bellows. "It's all right, *really*..."

"No! No it's *not*! ANSWER ME, NIGHT."

"There are no stones!" Coal yelled. "It was a trap! All of it! There are no stones, and there are no trials, okay? Now *put me down*!"

There was a thump and Fire hissed out a string of curses as he wheeled around, roaring in frustration.

"So what did we go through *all of that* for?" Sun demanded. "What about all the stories about the Defender Trials? You *can't* have made those all up! *Right*?" He glanced at the other hatchlings desperately.

"*I don't know,*" Coal repeated in an angry growl. "I don't know anything more than what I was told!"

"And *who* told you?" Cotton snarled. "Your *father*? Where is he, by the way? I thought this was all his elaborate scheme, but so far, none of us have seen talon nor tail of him. Was he scared to come and face us? Is that it? Is the big bad Darkwhisperer *too afraid* to face five inexperienced hatchlings?"

"Not at all," rose a growl from the direction of the entrance. "I was

just biding my time, waiting to see what Dragnaple's *precious* Defenders had in store for me. But now that I know, the real question should be; are you afraid to face *me*?"

# Chapter 23

Coal began to laugh.

Cloud's head swiveled toward the sound of the newcomer's voice, even as a chill of fear danced up and down his spine. He didn't need to see to know that there was only one dragon that could command such an intimidating presence, and fill Coal with so much glee simultaneously.

*Darkwhisperer is* here.

There was a thud as whoever was holding Coal released the hatchling, and backed away fearfully. Cloud went to rise, using the wall as a balance. He attempted to pinpoint the approximate location of the villainous black dragon, knowing he would give them very little time to prepare before he attacked.

"Fire?" he croaked, his talons finding nothing, but air.

Pawsteps from his right. "*Here*," came the Defender's growl, and Cloud could feel the immense fury boiling against the hatchling's scales. "Cloud," he added anxiously. "Are you going to be able to--"

"I can fight," Cloud growled, interrupting him with a lash of his tail. He refused to go out so easily. He was a *Defender*. Sight or no, he would continue to fight, "but I'll need you to be my eyes." He felt the jungle dragon tense, but to his relief, he didn't refuse.

A deep chortle came from the direction of Darkwhisperer, and Cloud felt the dark glare sweep over him. He barely suppressed a shudder as the hate and fury washed across his scales. *He's going to kill us*, he realized. *That dragon is going to murder us, no matter what it takes.* He silently willed his team to get ready. The former Defender was powerful, and very unpredictable. From everything Cloud had read about him, he tended to act on instinct more than common sense, which was a plus for him, but a downfall for the team who had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

"*Ah*," Darkwhisperer hissed in a falsely soothing tone. "What is this *beautiful* thing I sense? Is it *fear*?" A laugh broke through his growl, so rough and evil that Cloud wished he could run and hide somewhere the massive dragon would never come looking. "It has been a thousand years since I've been in the presence of *true* power." There was a long pause, and Cloud felt his heart hammering against his chest. "I *look forward* to stripping it from you."

"*Not a chance*!" Cotton spat bravely from somewhere behind Cloud. "You had your chance, and you *destroyed* it! You don't *deserve* to call yourself a Defender!" Cloud could hear the dread laced into her words, but he was immensely proud of her for speaking up.

Darkwhisperer wasn't.

With a hiss, he jerked away, his talons clattering against the rocks. Cloud followed the sound of his footsteps as the dragon brushed past him, and approached Cotton. "My, *my*," Darkwhisperer growled. "You *are* a feisty one, aren't you? State your name and rank, my dear."

"Princess Cotton Scale," she snapped, her voice holding a hint of warning. "Defender of Light."

"Oh, my *sincerest apologies*, Princess," Darkwhisperer sneered. "I had *no idea* I was in the presence of royalty."

"Don't touch her!" Meadow yelled from behind Cloud, causing the latter to jump.

Darkwhisperer spun around at this, laughing quietly. "And who's *this*? You seem...oddly familiar. Though, I must say, the spectacles clash *terribly*. You look like an owl with scales. Oh, well, let me guess. Defender of Weather, is it?"

"That's right," Meadow growled defiantly, "and we aren't about to let you destroy *everything* that we dragons have painstakingly built!"

"Oh, *poor hatchlings*," Darkwhisperer growled. There was a whoosh of air, and Cloud sensed the black dragon was weaving amongst

them, sizing them up disdainfully. "Did Clouddusk *not explain* it to you? It's not a question of whether or not you *want* to surrender your magic. Your powers belong to *me*. And I *will* take them back!"

His wings beat furiously as he dove out of sight. Cloud swung around desperately, straining his ears for something, *anything*, that could locate the villain. Once more, he cautiously reached out, but Fire was gone, and he was surrounded by darkness.

"Cloud! LOOK OUT!" Sun screamed.

A heavy force slammed into his back, sending him crashing to the floor with a yelp. Heavy claws pressed against his shoulders, near the lower region of his neck. He could feel the claws against his spine, digging in sharply between his scales, and he couldn't stop the roar of pain from bursting from his jaws. "So *you're* the one Clouddusk favors," the hiss came from his right. "When I saw you in the Dream Realm, I *told* you not to believe anything that goody-two-talons had to say. But you didn't listen, and *now,* you're going to pay for it."

"Cloud!" Meadow howled. There was a scrape as the hatchling scrambled up, and Cloud could hear his tail swishing across the cave floor.

*Don't come!* Cloud willed desperately. *Stay where you are!* They could do nothing to help, and he didn't want them getting hurt. He gasped as Darkwhisperer pinned his wings to his sides, grabbing him firmly, and jerking him up to his eye level. Cloud realized, with a jolt of panic, that his talons were no longer touching the ground.

"*Cloud*!" Fire and Cotton cried together.

"*Stay where you are*," Darkwhisperer snarled. "I see you edging closer. And, *you*! Fire-scales! Keep back or I'll kill him!" In one swift movement, he brought his talons sliding up to Cloud's throat, pausing near his voice box.

Admittedly, this was *not at all* where Cloud had anticipated he'd find himself, held captive in the hateful claws of the universe's most dangerous dragons. For a split moment, he wondered what would

have happened if he *had* flown away when he had the chance, back on Snowfalle. Certainly, he would not have been here. He'd be sipping coconuts off the balmy southern shores. He *definitely* would *not* be facing down a murderous, extremely insane dragon *five times* his size.

"You don't want to do this!" he gasped, his heart rate spiking even higher. He feared Darkwhisperer could feel it by now.

"Oh, *don't I*?" Darkwhisperer spat. "Tell me, Defender. Give me *one reason* why I shouldn't slice you apart right here and now."

"You hurt him," Sun snarled, "and you'll have to deal with *all* of *us*."

Darkwhisperer's head snapped away from Cloud as he prepared to growl something at the yellow hatchling. Cloud took his chance. Twisting as fast and as hard as he could, he bashed Darkwhisperer in the chest with his tail. The black dragon let out a grunt, and the talons around his throat loosened just enough for him to break free.

He jumped back, wheeling to face the dragon angrily. He sensed the others' concern for him. "I'm fine," he growled. "Don't worry about me." Then, to Darkwhisperer, he added, "Now, it's *our* turn." He built the power around his jaws once more, and the familiar tingle rushed through his body. *Maybe all it'll take is one hit. One good strike, and it'll all be over.*

He opened his mouth to release the blast...

And Fire beat him to it.

The air sparked as all of the oxygen was suddenly yanked toward the jungle hatchling, and through the shroud of darkness, Cloud could feel several strands of fire forming throughout the cavern. He felt them dash past him, but before he could turn, Darkwhisperer had lunged for him once more.

"*Move!*" Sun snarled, appearing out of nowhere and shoving him back with a powerful strike of his wings. His claws clattered loudly as he reared up, catching Darkwhisperer's talons in his own, and driving him backward with a fierce growl.

The dragons struggled. Cloud craned his neck, piecing together the action by the growls and grunts of the two reptiles. "You're *not* stronger than *me*," Darkwhisperer spat. Sun's hind talons screeched painfully against the ground as he struggled to hold back the dragon.

"I don't have to be," Sun replied. "Just *smarter*. Fire, NOW!" With that, he abruptly released Darkwhisperer, sending the latter careening unsteadily forward. Sun ducked as Fire let out a loud hiss, and a ginormous ball of fire came flying out of the darkness, slamming into the huge black dragon head-on.

Fluttering open his wings as much as he could in the narrower chamber, Sun grabbed ahold of Cloud, and pulled him back away from the villain.

"Did it work?" Meadow hissed, appearing beside Cloud, causing him to jump once more.

*Okay, so he is very light on his feet. Got it.*

"I don't know," Sun whispered back. Then, for Cloud's benefit, he added, "He's not moving. It's almost like...I don't know...he's *healing* or something."

Darkwhisperer let out a low chuckle.

"*Dude*," Fire groaned. "I *wish* you hadn't mentioned that."

"*Watch it!*" Cotton hissed from their right. "He's getting back up!"

The hatchlings scrambled backward as Darkwhisperer rose once more. Cloud felt his team flank him, two on his left, two on his right. *Just like Clouddusk's team.*

"What do we do now?" Meadow whimpered.

*"Now,"* Darkwhisperer hissed, "you *die!"* Fire erupted from his jaws, and the dragonets scattered as part of the ceiling crumbled around them. The cavern shook violently, and large slabs of rock began to fall from the air.

"Take cover!" Cotton yelled.

Cloud felt someone seize him by the wings, and jerk him back as a large chunk of granite smashed onto the floor, just inches from where he was hovering. He gasped weakly, twisting to try and distinguish who had grabbed him, but he could only see blackness as that same someone threw their wings over the both of them to shield them from the falling debris.

The cave continued to quake violently for another minute, and then finally settled back against the mountains. Cloud coughed, fanning away the smoke and dust with his wings. He heard the forced breathing of the hatchlings. His hearing must have amplified since his eyesight was malfunctioning. He inhaled deeply, coughing as dust filled his nostrils. "Is...is everybody okay?" he called, silently cursing himself for not being able to locate them.

"We're fine," Cotton grunted. There was a thump, and a pile of rocks crumbled. Cloud instantly imagined the worst fate, with them all crushed underneath the mountain. "Fire absorbed the blast."

*He can do that?*

"But Darkwhisperer is gone!" Fire added nervously.

*Probably thought he killed us with that earthquake*, Cloud decided. He took another deep breath, relieved when it wasn't as much as a struggle as the first. He wished he knew the condition of the cave. Had it been filled? What about the exit? Were they trapped inside?

"Everybody *stand back*!" Sun snarled fiercely. "I think I can move away some of these boulders!"

"No, *don't*!" Meadow yelped in alarm. "You'll bring the whole cave down on us!"

"The cave is *already* on us!"

Cloud grimaced as the voices pounded inside his skull. He couldn't focus on just one sound, and his eyes were *still burning*. "Fire?" he growled, shaking his head, trying to clear away the excessive ringing.

"I'm here, Cloud," the red hatchling answered. "On your left. What are we going to do?"

*What can we do?* Cloud thought. *He's already proven himself stronger and more clever than us*. "We have to go after him!" he decided. "He won't be content with killing us! He'll destroy *all* the Realms!"

"I agree, but first, we have to get out of *here,*" Sun pointed out. "*Seriously,* guys. I think I can get us free!"

Cloud heard the hisses of worry from the others, but Sun was right. Their options were *extremely* limited, and he knew none of the rest of them could move entire boulders so easily. "All right," he said to Sun. "Go ahead, but be careful."

"Naturally."

As the yellow dragon set to work, Cloud turned his attention to another matter. "Who has eyes on Coal?"

"I'm right here, Star," came the growl from just to the left of him. His voice sounded weak, but it still held an air of confidence, as though he hadn't quite grasped the situation.

For some reason, he wasn't trying to run.

"I've got him," Cotton promised, approaching from behind, growling as she firmly grabbed the black hatchling.

Ahead of him, several rocks rolled to the floor and others clattered near his claws. He took an instinctive step backward, ears twitching nervously.

"Got it," Sun announced. "Let's go!"

"Here," Meadow offered, positioning himself next to Cloud and holding out a wing to guide him. "This way. How are you feeling?"

"Honestly? Like my eyes are on fire," Cloud answered hesitantly as they began walking. *And I can't see,* he added silently, though he couldn't bring himself to say it aloud. *What if I am blind? What if I'll never be able to see again?*

"Okay," Meadow said calmly. *Too* calmly.

"*Meadow*," Cloud said seriously. "How bad is it? Be honest."

Meadow hesitated. "I don't know," he said finally. "I could give some hypothesis, but I won't know the full extent of the damage until I can get a closer examination."

That wasn't at all comforting.

"Over here!" Sun called. "He went this way!"

They clambered over the debris and emerged once more into the sheer cold. Cotton hissed as the icy wind blasted into her, and Cloud braced himself for the sudden temperature plunge. He yelped as a wad of snow was dropped against his face, and he immediately tried to brush it away.

"*No*!" Meadow cried, grabbing his talons quickly. "Leave it! It'll help with the burning until we can get some proper medical treatment."

Cloud nodded, and Meadow let go of him. "In that case, let's focus on finding Darkwhisperer before he hurts someone else."

"Where would he go?" Fire mused aloud. "What's his plan?"

"His *plan*?" Cotton snorted. "I think a plan is the *last* thing on his mind right now."

"As much as I hate to say it," Sun growled. "I agree with Cotton on this one. Darkwhisperer doesn't seem to be thinking clearly. Otherwise, he wouldn't have left before being *absolutely* sure we were dead. Which means--"

"Which means we have no idea where he is going, or what he is planning to do," Fire interrupted in frustration. "ARGH. We were SO CLOSE! We could have STOPPED HIM!" He slammed the cave with his tail angrily.

"We might not know where he is," Meadow said thoughtfully, "but we *do* have someone here who knows how he thinks."

"THAT'S RIGHT!" Sun shouted triumphantly, wheeling around. "WHERE IS HE GOING, YOU EVIL BRAMBLE-SNORTING SNAKE?"

Coal yelped loudly, and Cloud had the sneaking suspicion that he'd been picked up again. "I don't know!" he howled.

"For a dragon who claims to be Darkwhisperer's son," Fire growled. "You sure have a lot of '*don't knows*'. What will it take to convince you? A burnt scale here? A disintegrated talon there? I think a scorched ear would go very nicely, don't you?"

"I'm telling you, *I don't know*!" Coal repeated, his voice rising in panic. "He wants to be ruler of Dragnaple, to reshape it somehow! I don't ask questions! I just do what I'm told! That's the deal!"

"But you're his *son*!" Meadow exclaimed, shocked.

"But that doesn't mean he has to *like* me," Coal snarled back. "I'm just his servant, *okay*? Not everyone has the poster-parents of good like *you*!"

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Meadow growled challengingly.

"*Okay*, let's think." Cloud stepped in before things escalated any further. "Reshaping the Realms. How could he do that?"

"I don't think that's possible," Cotton pointed out. "No one knows how they were created in the first place."

"I don't think he meant it in a *literal* sense," Cloud explained quickly, trying not to imagine how that might look. "But if he wanted to, say, *change* something, how would he go about that?"

"Well, first he'd have to gather the leaders of all the Realms, and somehow convince them to side with him. Which, given his lack of charm, will probably be *extremely* difficult."

"But he also wants to be *ruler,*" Sun said, "and I doubt he's going to sit back and wait for a peaceful transfer of power."

"Okay," Meadow broke in. "So, we know he can't just walk up and demand all nine thrones. What other ways could he get the power?"

"He could take them by force," Cotton growled.

"But, that would mean he would need to get all the rulers together in one place at one time," Sun said again. "And the tribes hate each other. They'd never agree to it."

"Well, that's not...*totally* true."

"What?" Cloud twisted toward her. "Are you saying the leaders are actually going to speak?"

"There is a peace talk scheduled to begin this evening," Cotton said with a shrug. "But I don't see how that is going to..." She trailed off, suddenly realizing what that could mean.

"That's got to be it!" Cloud exclaimed. "It's perfect! Cotton, where is the talk supposed to take place?"

"Marblerivver," Sun interjected, stepping forward now. "Sandtron City. My family is part of the royal guard protecting our queen."

"Oh, *great stars*," Cotton gasped. "My parents are going to be there too! We have to go! We have to go *now*!"

"Wait!" Cloud called as she kicked off from the ledge. "We need a plan! We can't just go barging in without a plan!"

But the other hatchlings were taking off now as well.

"We can come up with a plan on the way," Sun said, yanking Coal after him. "But, now, we need to fly. *As fast as we can*."

Meadow grabbed Cloud's forearm, and pulled him into the air after him. Cloud flapped his wings as hard as he could, but he still felt like they were moving in slow motion. Their chances seemed to be growing slimmer by the minute, and he couldn't help but wonder how it would all end. They were hurtling toward an unknown world, to stop the greatest threat Dragnaple had ever faced, with nothing more than a few magical abilities, and a desperate hope of success.

*We have to protect the Realms*, he thought determinedly. *We are*

*Defenders. That is our job. We have to protect all of those innocent dragons.*

*And we will.*

*Or we will die trying.*

# Chapter 24

"*Do you see anything*?" Cloud yelled over the roaring of the sandstorm as they flew as fast as they could across the desert. The wind slashed across his body, and he gritted his teeth, immensely grateful for the full-body cloak Sun had managed to get for him. It was very similar to a normal traveler's cloak, but instead of encompassing only his head and ending halfway down his neck, it continued on, snaking all across his body, shielding his wings and tail, and making him look somewhat like *any other* sand-trotting hatchling. It had been the best cover the desert could provide from the rough terrain and so far, it appeared to be working.

"*Nothing*!" Cotton shouted back, impatience biting into her tone. "Where in the blasted moons *are* they?"

"A little further north!" Sun hollered. "We've just passed the Fountain of Sandscript!"

"The *what*?" Meadow shouted.

"La, la, la, desert history, *who cares*," Cotton growled. "Someone just point me in the direction of some menacingly evil demon dragon so I can *melt off his face*." She angled her wings and swept down toward the dunes in the attempt to frighten a band of hares.

"Someone wanna stop her before she terrifies all of the wildlife around here?" Sun suggested.

"So what is our plan for when we get there?" Fire called ignoring the desert hatchling's request, gliding toward Meadow and Cloud instead. Cloud could feel the anxiety rolling off of his scales. "Assuming Darkwhisperer isn't...you know...*already there*."

"I figured the best thing we can do is try to blend in," Cloud answered. "We want to cause the least amount of panic as possible."

"And we know Darkwhisperer will go for the kings and queens

first," Sun said, "not the spectators."

"Right," Cloud went on. "So I was thinking Meadow and I could join the crowd. From there we could work our way down to the podiums. Fire, obviously you can't be close to anyone, so you'll be in charge of evacuating the audience once Darkwhisperer arrives. Hang back and observe from a distance, all right?"

"Roger that."

"*Great.* Cotton, since your family is already going to be represented, I want you with them, protecting the rulers and helping Fire when the time comes."

"And *then* I get to slice someone's face off, right?" Cotton growled.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," Cloud promised. He'd rather not slice *anyone's* face, but it was beginning to look unavoidable. "But for now, just try and act like you don't know what is going on, all right?"

"Sure. Whatever."

"And, Sun? You know this terrain better than any of us. I'm going to need you to stay close to Cotton, but have a secondary escape route ready if everything goes south. Do you think you can do that?"

"Would you like your evacuation route prickly or sunny-side-up?" It was easy to tell that he was smiling.

"With the least number of cacti possible, please."

"Consider it done. Turn left here."

They continued flying on for a while. The heat of the multiple suns bore heavily on their shoulders, though not as deeply as the consequence of failure. Cloud felt like they were flying toward their own execution.

And not only theirs. If they couldn't stop Darkwhisperer, *everyone's.*

So, no pressure there.

The terrain slowly began to morph the further north they flew. What had once been an entirely sand-blasted ocean of dunes had become a field of stickers, thorns, and tumbleweeds. Several small establishments dotted the landscape, and more than one dragon turned their eyes skyward as the team hurried past.

The structures grew more frequent, and then, in the distance, he could hear the bustling of a city. "Is that it?" he questioned.

"That's it," Sun confirmed. "Come on. If we're quick, we can get through without alerting any of the guards."

For a moment, Cloud didn't understand what he meant, but then he felt Meadow tug gently at his arm, a signal for him to go lower. Angling his wings, he followed the other hatchlings to the ground. The sand was hot and burned the soles of his talons, and he let out a hiss of pain.

"Not so close!" Sun warned. "Hover *near* the ground, not *on* it!"

Cloud scrambled to obey, jumping back into the air. "Sorry."

"This way," the sand dragon growled, "through the gates. And for Clouddusk's sake*, try* not to draw attention to yourselves."

*Easier said than done.* Cloud hurried to keep up. He felt the hatchlings inch closer to him, their center, as they wound their way toward the city. The air here was thicker. Cloud coughed at the stink, and lowered his head, trying to rid the smell from his nostrils. *Is this what a city is like? It's awful!* He let out a low snarl of annoyance.

"Shhh!" Sun hissed. "No growling! We're here." His wingbeats grew sharper as he bounded forward to speak to the guards.

"Halt!" one of them commanded. "State your name, rank, and business."

Meadow startled, and Cloud grasped his arm tightly in return, warning him to remain still and keep his head down. Anyone realizing he wasn't a desert dragon could gain them attention they *really* didn't want.

"Greetings, Sidewinder!" Sun called out cheerfully. "We're here for the peace talks?" His voice hitched hopefully.

"Hmmm," the guard grunted. "Your name and rank?"

"But...but you *know* me!" Sun stuttered. "You see me every half-moon!"

"Oh, right, of course. Silly me," the guard growled. "Name and rank, *please*."

*He's nervous,* Cloud observed, practically *feeling* Sun's mind whirling for an excuse. *He's afraid someone is going to notice us.*

"Sun Scale of the Second Division," Sun went on hastily. "My family is already inside, getting ready to defend Queen Rattlesnake, but I went back to fetch my servants. I thought..." he paused dramatically, "even if they *are* lower than me, they should at least be permitted to see peace make between the realms."

*"Servants*?" Cotton screeched, outraged, smoke pluming from behind her hood. "I am *no one's*--oof!"

Cloud jabbed her roughly in the ribs, and she dropped back, coughing.

"Sorry about her," Sun said quickly to the soldier. "She's new."

"Hmmm," said the guard again. "Well...I suppose..."

"Oh, *great*! Thank you! See you later then!" Sun said in a rush, whooshing past the guards, and taking off through the gates.

The other hatchlings scrambled after him, leaving Sidewinder standing there, looking extremely perplexed.

"Wow," Fire breathed as they raced into a deserted bazaar. "That was *close*! Good thinking on that lie, Sun!"

"I am *not* your servant, desert snake," Cotton snapped.

"Cotton, *relax*," Cloud said gently. "We all know you're a princess. It

was just a trick to get us through the checkpoint. And it worked didn't it?"

"I suppose," Cotton muttered, pulling back her wings and sinking to glower at Sun in silence. "So now what?"

"Now you should go find your folks," Sun answered, ignoring her death glare, "and everybody else should get ready. I'm going to tie *this on*e up somewhere for now." He prodded Coal sharply in the side. The hatchling yelped. "Everybody be prepared," he went on, "the meeting is scheduled to begin at sundown."

***

"Is everybody in position?" Cloud whispered to Meadow as they began to work their way down the stairs into the crowded stadium. He carefully wove around two noisy Monterra dragons, ducking cautiously under their huge wings, wincing as his cloak was snagged momentarily on a jagged bench.

"Almost," Meadow replied. "I can see Cotton. The delegates are approaching the stage now. Sun is at the left exit, and I think I see Fire in the distance. Huh, he looks so tiny from here. Another good example of--"

"Science lecture later, please," Cloud interrupted. "Let's get our seats."

Meadow grunted in agreement, and led him to a row of nearly empty bleachers. He picked the seat nearest the edge, and Cloud settled down next to him. The latter strained his ears, listening as the rulers reached the stand and quietly clambered into their seats.

*For a bunch of dragons who hate each other, they seem very cordial,* Cloud noted. He wondered what other pieces of story were missing. Like, did they maybe not *completely* despise each other?

"Welcome, Kings and Queens." A Marblerivver dragon spoke loudly into a microphone. "It is our honor and our privilege to welcome you to Sandtron City, and we hope your time here is most pleasant. And now, if I may, I would like to call our first speaker, King

Crevice of Monterra, to the podium. Your Majesty?"

"Thank you," the mountain tribe dragon rumbled, his voice echoing off the distant dunes. The cheer of his subjects nearly overpowered his voice, and he waited patiently for the noise to die down. "Before we begin, I would like to thank King Rattlesnake and Queen Tarantula for hosting this event, and it is my hope that, by the time we have finished, an arrangement of peace can be reached."

"There's Cotton," Meadow whispered.

"Where?" Cloud questioned.

"Oh, *right*, sorry. Um...just to the right of the stand. She's standing next to a shiny silverish-gray hatchling. A boyfriend? He looks a lot like her. They're obviously from the same tribe." A twinge of jealously crept into Meadow's observation and the hatchling stiffened.

"Brother," Cloud objected automatically. "Remember? Cotton said she had a brother."

"Oh, *yes*. I do remember that." Relief flooded his voice, and the hatchling sat back with a long breath. "*Huh*. I'll admit...not what I was expecting."

"What *were* you expecting?" Cloud couldn't help, but question. "Another Cotton?"

"Kinda, I guess, yeah. You know, I *really* like her, Cloud. I think we might have a chance."

*She doesn't even know you exist, and you've already planned your entire life?* That sounded like something Meadow would do. *He's too innocent for this world.* Cloud chuckled sadly to himself before growing serious once more. "Any sign of Darkwhisperer?" he said, abruptly changing the subject.

"Not yet, but if we were right, it shouldn't be too much longer."

Cloud hated the idea of having to wait, but he realized he didn't have much choice in the matter. They couldn't stop Darkwhisperer

if they weren't there when he arrived. He turned his head toward the sky to help watch, but then, with a sinking feeling, he realized he wouldn't be much help.

"I need some fresh air," he mumbled to Meadow, startling the hatchling, who leaped up after him. "Too much sand. No, *no*, it's fine. Stay here. I'm not going far."

*I just have to get out of here.*

As Crevice began a long-winded speech about the "olden days", Cloud hurriedly clambered up the steps to the outside of the dome. He couldn't breathe, and it felt like the walls of the world were closing in on him. Several dragons shifted uncomfortably as he passed, but said nothing. Cloud wondered if they were even conscious of anything besides the stage.

Reaching the end of the roofed structure, he opened his wings, and kicked off into the air. He didn't know which way he was going. He didn't really care. He ignored the heat, and the sand, and the way other dragons seemed to leap out of his way as he flew past and began his tight circle around the stadium.

*Useless.*

*Useless.*

*USELESS.*

He wanted to scream. He wanted to set something on fire just for the satisfaction of watching it burn.

But he *couldn't* watch it burn.

He couldn't watch *anything* anymore.

He knew Meadow meant well when he said he'd look at it later, but Cloud knew just as much about medicine as the green hatchling. There was *no cure* for what had happened to him. There was *no way* to fix it. He was blind. *Blind,* and that was all there was to it.

Had it been too much to get his hopes up? To begin to dream of

making a difference, or of becoming somebody that he'd always wanted to be? In a single instant, everything he'd worked for, everything he'd *dreamed* of, had been ripped away from him.

How could a blind dragon *ever* lead a team?

How could he be anything, but a burden to the others?

He didn't know how long he flew or how many protective loops he had made around the arena, but very little time seemed to pass before he heard wingbeats behind him, and he twisted around, expecting Darkwhisperer to suddenly fall upon him.

*"Cloud!"*

*Meadow.*

Cloud paused, waiting as the little hatchling caught up to him. "What is it?" he growled. "Can't you see I'm *busy*?" He swept a talon toward the desert.

"Sun sent me after you," Meadow huffed, ignoring his griping. "It's Coal. He wants to speak to you."

# Chapter 25

"*All right*," Cloud snapped, storming into the jail and slamming the door shut behind him. Several desert prisoners snapped and hissed as he passed, and he paused only when Meadow touched him gently on the talon. He turned toward a cell on his left, and put on the fiercest glare he could manage. "You said you wanted to talk. So *talk*."

"How nice of you to accept my invitation," Coal growled, his voice placing him near the bars. "Welcome to my humble abode. I think you'll find it...quite unsatisfactory."

"Quit stalling," Cloud ordered. "What do you want? In case you have forgotten, I am quite busy trying to stop your *extremely insane* father from destroying the universe."

"Always right to the point, that's what I like about you, Cloud," Coal chuckled. "You know exactly how to push a dragon's limits."

"Is that what you called me here for?" Cloud snapped. "To mock me?"

"Hmmm." There was a tapping against the metal bars, and Cloud growled, flicking his ears away from the sound. "As a matter of fact, *no*. You seem to trust those hatchlings out there. Their advice. I thought I might impart a little piece of my own."

"I don't have time for this." Cloud turned away sharply, feeling along the walls for the way out. Talons clattered behind him as Meadow scrambled after him. "Come on," he growled to the hatchling. "Let's get back to the others."

"*Wait*!" Coal called after them, his voice ringing off of the walls. "You *don't know* what you are up against! Darkwhisperer will *destroy* every one of you. He can't be stopped. And if you knew what was good for you, you would get as far away from this place as you could. Because, once he gets what he wants, he'll have no further

use for this sand-ridden city."

"We're not leaving," Meadow growled with uncharacteristic anger. "We're going to protect all of those dragons out there."

"Then you're more foolish than I thought," Coal snarled. His tail whacked the walls of the cell and he shuffled as he turned his back on them. "I suppose I'll see you in the afterlife." He let out a long-suffering sigh.

"If I didn't know better," Cloud growled. "I'd say you were trying to help us."

"Is *that* what you think?" Coal sneered. "Tell me this, Defender; What had sight, but couldn't see? What is hidden, yet is clear? What is hidden in the depths of the sea?"

"You know I hate riddles."

"*Exactly*." Coal sounded very pleased with himself. "Which is why this riddle is not for you."

In his mind's eye, Cloud could see Coal's head swiveling from him toward Meadow, and he instantly wished he knew where the green hatchling was standing so he could shield him from the black dragon's steely glare.

"I know everything about you," Coal hissed. "*Every one* of you. I know your secrets. I've seen what you fear *and* what you desire. You dream of your family, don't you? Don't try and deny it. Even now I can feel the longing welling up inside of you. You're so *desperate* to see them, and you hoped becoming a Defender would help you find them. But you've grown no closer to the truth. You don't know what you are. But *I* do."

"Leave him alone!" Cloud snarled. "Your fight is with me. ME, Coal! Not him!"

"And that's where you're wrong, *Cloud Star*," Coal jeered. "You see, I deal all the cards in this game. I know more about your team than you know about yourself. I know how Fire dreams of going back to his Realm one day, when everyone will be safe from his fire-scales. I

know Cotton's desire to be a strong and independent leader. How Sun wants to do what's best for his *quarter-of-a-million* siblings, and how he wants to make up for his past mistakes. And how *you* want *so desperately* to be someone the Realms can look up to and respect. I know *everything*, Cloud, so really, it will only be a matter of time before Darkwhisperer knows everything as well."

"So you're a mind reader," Cloud snapped. "I'm not surprised. Was that one of Darkwhisperer's abilities too? As the Defender of the Night?" He wasn't sure if Coal was startled by this piece of information. He'd just fit the last of the pieces together himself. The sixth Defender, the one said to be lost to time, the one who had originally led Clouddusk's team, had been Darkwhisperer.

"You may think you know everything about us," he went on, "but I know just as much about *you*. You're Darkwhisperer's son. Probably his only one. You have some of his abilities, yet, when you had the chance to use them against us, you *didn't*. And there can only be two reasons for that. The first is that you don't know how. Perhaps Darkwhisperer never taught you, because he didn't want you to be powerful like him. The second reason is that, somewhere deep inside of you, you know what you are doing is wrong, and you wanted to help us, but you couldn't come straight out into the light. Not with him watching you. *That's* why you didn't put up a fight back on Tundrae."

"*Or* it was because your hulking mass of a bodyguard *melted my scales*," Coal growled. "In case it hasn't, by some *spectacular chance*, sunk into your brain, I am *not* your friend! I am *not* on your side, and I certainly *did not* spare you intentionally."

"So why are you giving us a chance to run?" Cloud challenged. "If you truly didn't care what happened to us, you'd have kept your mouth shut and *let* us walk into some kind of trap."

"Obviously, that was a mistake," Coal growled.

"What are you *so afraid of?"* Cloud demanded.

"Not *you*."

"No." Riding off a whim, Cloud went on. "You're not afraid of me. You're afraid of *him*. You know what he can do, and that terrifies you. You think we don't have a chance. But what if I told you that we had a plan? That we already know how to defeat Darkwhisperer?" He felt Meadow jerk toward him in surprise, no doubt wondering just what plan Cloud was referring to. He mentally prayed the hatchling wouldn't say anything that would make Coal suspicious.

Coal sniffed. "Then you probably shouldn't be telling me."

"But you're not going to help Darkwhisperer," Cloud said. "Because you don't *want* to help him. He doesn't care about you. You said it yourself. He only thinks of you as his slave. But it doesn't have to be that way," Maybe it was something deep inside of him, or maybe it was just a desperate last attempt to save his brother, either way, he couldn't stop what came out of his mouth next. "Come with us. Be a hero. Isn't that what you've always wanted?" He held out a shaking talon, sliding it through the bars. "Join us. Become the sixth Defender."

"And *what?*" Coal asked. "Have everyone look down on me? I know what my powers are for, Star, but they'll never accept me. Not after what I've done. Besides...I'm never getting out of this place." He sounded saddened by this.

"What do you mean?" Meadow questioned.

"I've done too many bad things," Coal answered grimly. "And for that, I'm going to have to pay. Over half the Realms want my head served on a silver platter, so I'll be lucky to get out of this mess alive, never mind surviving my father."

"So *come with us*," Cloud said. "We can talk to the kings, get you set free. You don't have to stay here."

Coal refused. "It's not that simple. I *need* to do this, Cloud. Not because some dragon kingdom is keeping me prisoner, but because, if I want to right these wrongs, I have to do them *the right way*. The way I should have done it the first time."

"But...you aren't helping Darkwhisperer?"

"Not anymore," Coal huffed. "*You*, freakish little nerd. When you *do* find your family, remember me, okay? Not everyone gets so fortunate in the parent department."

"I don't understand..." Meadow said. "Do you *know* who my parents are?"

"I do," Coal said. "But I think it might be better for you to figure it out on your own."

"But, why--"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off abruptly by a roar of fury that flooded the heavens, the sounds of heavy wingbeats coming their way, and the screams of panic and fury from the direction of the stadium.

It didn't take a genius to guess what was happening.

Darkwhisperer had arrived.

# Chapter 26

"*Let's go*!" Cloud roared, already whirling back toward the exit as something near the back of the room clicked and Coal drew a sharp startled breath at something Cloud could not see.

Scales rushed past Cloud before he could question Coal's sudden change in attitude, alerting him to Meadow's hasty bolt as the drake hit the cobblestone stairs and fled back into the open desert. Cloud was only steps behind him, fumbling slightly for his footing across the uneven surface.

They winged it toward the gathering almost side-by-side, perfectly paced with Meadow staying close enough to guide the blue hatchling, yet struggling to keep stride with the larger dragon's speed.

Upon reaching the stadium, the two hit the ground at a breakneck pace, running below the shadowed arch and back into the dome where chaos had already ensued. A wall of disarrayed chaos met them as they attempted to shove their way through hundreds of squirming and writhing bodies all fighting to escape the coliseum. Screaming deafened Cloud's ears and he instinctively drew them back, fighting to remain focused on Meadow's small talons clattering down the stairs and pushing back against the mob.

It was clear Darkwhisperer hadn't given the rulers a chance to surrender...or even react. As the drakes arrived, he spat out a wave of fire across the circumference of the arena, setting it ablaze and sending the few brave lingering dragons scattering. It was absolute mayhem and that was *just* what the wicked dragon wanted.

"Crevice!" Meadow shrieked, the horror drenching his words over the sounds of flames and wailing as Cloud misjudged a step and stumbled sideways into a row of podiums. "The Monterrian king! He's *dead,* Cloud! Darkwhisperer *killed* him! Cloud...t-there's blood

*everywhere!"*

*Of course, he is,* Cloud reasoned darkly. *He was the first dragon in four hundred years to discuss the idea of peace amongst the realms. Darkwhisperer is all about war and destruction. It makes his job to rule the galaxy much easier. He would want to get rid of anyone who thought otherwise as quickly as possible.*

No signs of his team anywhere though. He wasn't sure if that made him feel better or worse.

"Meadow!" he roared. "Do you *see* the others? *Where* are the others?"

"I d-don't know!" Meadow panicked. "There are too m-many dragons! I can't see them anywhere! Cloud, *what* do we *d-do*?"

The hatchling abruptly stopped and Cloud body-checked him, nearly sending both toppling over the railing and into the pit. Heaving himself up, Cloud felt Meadow push against him as he desperately began running toward something Cloud had yet to locate.

"Meadow!"

"*Cloud!* Over here! There's someone down there in the ring! I think they're Raynbow!"

"*Wait!* Meadow, we don't have *time* to—" *He thinks it's Cotton,* Cloud realized, the cold dread pouring into his gut as he staggered after his friend. *Oh, great stars,* please *no.*

"Cotton!" Meadow screamed, his voice ricocheting off the surrounding walls and bouncing right back into Cloud's ears. The latter winced, recoiling as his tail smacked a nearby row of pillars. "*Cotton*!"

"Meadow, you *have* to keep your voice *down*!" Cloud warned, throwing down his head as yet *another* massive wave of fleeing citizens rushed past, tearing at his cloak and knocking back his hood, revealing his scales. Fortunately, by this point, they were all too terrified of the huge looming mass of evil to care about one insignificant drake fighting his way back to what would *certainly* be

his demise. "We can't let him know that we're here!"

"It's *too late* for that!" Meadow shouted back. "Fire's been spotted! Sun's trying to herd the rest of the civilians out of the arena now, but Fire is standing right in the middle of everything and Darkwhisperer is looking *right* at him! We *need* to get down there and help him before he gets himself killed! Cotton! COTTON! Oh...that's...*not* Cotton...great *stars,* that's *awful*...her...oh great *Clouddusk,* she's *dead*..." His voice faltered and Cloud, even through darkened vision, could almost see him falling back into a faint. He didn't need to see the corpse. He already knew what was there.

*We were too late. We couldn't save them all.*

"Cloud! This way! *Hurry!* He's going after the leaders! Sun and Fire aren't going to be able to hold him off!"

Before Cloud could ask *what* exactly he was planning to do, the hatchling had already run off, the clinking of chains alerting Cloud to the drake's rapid ascent over the railing and into the ring. His talons touched down with a resounding *thump*.

Mumbling silent prayers of protection, Cloud dashed after him, heaving himself over the fencing and plunging into the arena. His body hit the sand awkwardly and he felt himself sinking into the moldable sand as he fought to right himself, fully throwing off his cloak and revealing himself to everyone who remained. All around him, panicked gasps overshadowed the furious growls echoing from just to his right. Overhead, he could hear Fire hovering closer, trying desperately to avoid the dragons fleeing skyward. Thudding pawsteps placed Sun somewhere in the midst of the fray, struggling through the ocean of terrified dragons.

"Go! *Go*! Run!" the sand hatchling was yelling above the sounds of screaming and furious roaring. "*Get out of here*!" Someone called his name, but he didn't hear them as he continued to struggle against the onslaught.

Cloud pinpointed Darkwhisperer's movements as the villain dove toward an unsuspecting Skycloude hatchling near the back of the fleeing pack. Summoning his powers into his jaws, Cloud lunged

forward and blasted Darkwhisperer in the side. The Monterrian roared in pain and reared back, thrown from his target, his attention drawn away from the sky hatchling, focused now on the Defender placing himself squarely in front of him.

Cloud *needed* to buy his teammates some time. There would be no victory if innocent dragons got caught in the middle of the crossfire, and to do *that,* he needed Darkwhisperer to fight him and ignore the other hatchlings as they moved about the ring.

"*Hey*!" he roared again, swinging his head back toward what he suspected was the middle of the arena. He opened his wings and waved his talons, trying to make himself a *very* noticeable and *very* large target that Darkwhisperer absolutely could *not* miss. This action, of course, did not go to ease the stampeding crowds upon seeing him for the first time. Hood down, cloak thrown to the side like trash, he no longer had time to be subtle. So, this *was* him, open and exposed for the world to see; the *last* of the blue dragons, fighting with every breath to defend them from an evil they had only *read* about in scrolls. "Why don't you pick on someone your *own* size?"

Darkwhisperer spat something and there was a resounding thwack as his tail collided with Cotton as she came charging in for the kill, knocking her forcibly backwards into the wall. Fire hissed a phrase Cloud couldn't quite make out as the clatter of talons grew closer and Darkwhisperer was suddenly bearing down on him.

"Cloud, *look out*!" Fire bellowed.

The warning came just in time as the blast of hot air whistled past his snout—a clear attempt to melt his head with an overly powerful blast of fire.

He jerked away from the blast, bringing his talons arching around in the effort to parry the attack, but Darkwhisperer was *much* quicker. His talons grabbed ahold of the roots of Cloud's wings just before the rest of his weight crashed down upon him. Cloud screamed, trying to wrench away from the powerful grip, but Darkwhisperer just laughed and threw him into the wall.

"You *pests* have interrupted my plans for the *last time*!" he snarled, opening his mouth and preparing to blast the drake from existence.

There was a roar of fury from somewhere nearby and the fire abruptly veered off course, exploding into a portion of the wall to the left of Cloud's head. He winced, struggling to stand up. Everything was spinning and he felt like he wanted to sleep for a hundred years. It was a moment before his brain could process that the blast had missed him and that he was unhurt.

He heard frantic wingbeats along with the hissing and snarling of two different dragons as they writhed and struggled on the desert floor. The smell of burning scales told Cloud who had come to his rescue and he felt a small smile crawl through the grimace. *Fire*. The red hatchling was strong, probably the strongest out of all of them. If *anyone* could defeat Darkwhisperer, even *without* powers, Fire would be that dragon.

He slumped in relief, his head and neck throbbing from where he smashed it against the concrete. He heard more wings swooping low from the heavens and he lifted his head slowly as he heard Cotton and Sun's figures touching down in front of him, along with a *third* set of heavier talons.

"The spectators are out!" Cotton growled from his right. "Now, let's *destroy* this guy and get you to a hospital before you bleed out on us!"

"Um...*hello*?" spoke up another voice, one that Cloud didn't recognize. The owner was probably male, a little bit younger than them, and by the way his voice shook, *extremely* terrified, which was not at all unexpected. "You *do know* this guy's a *blue dragon*?" There was no hatred in his words, though *plenty* of uncertainty, but Cloud didn't care about that. He was just glad he wasn't about to get obliterated by a second enemy.

"Yes," Cotton answered shortly, her head swinging to address the newest arrival as she began to shift her weight from leg to leg. "And, *as I explained before*, he's on *our* side. Everyone, this is my brother, Steel. He stayed behind to help evacuate the civilians."

"You're the Raynbow drake from before!" Meadow realized, though only Cloud would understand what he was talking about.

"Hello," Cloud grunted, heaving himself to his feet, still swaying a little unsteadily. He swept his tail, fighting to regain his equilibrium against dozens of "I think the *proper* thing to say here is 'thank you.'"

"Happy to help," Steel replied cordially. "My sister explained everything. I'm here to help you...*if* I *can*."

"*Everything*?" Sun echoed.

The drake chuckled dryly. "She's a fast talker. Besides, the massive ten-foot-tall monster of death *kind* of confirms her story. So, what's the plan?"

"*Oh*, so we *do* have a plan?" Fire shrilled as Darkwhisperer swung his tail at his head. He quickly ducked and retaliated with a buffet of his wings. It wasn't necessarily doing much damage against the bigger dragon, but it was *at least* distracting him long enough for Cloud to regain his bearings and for the others to come up with an *actual* plan. "*That's* new! Mind *sharing*?"

"Our parents are safe, right?" Cotton demanded. Her head was turned again, but it was pretty clear she was talking to the drake on her left as he nervously shuffled his claws through the sand. "You got them out of here like I told you to?"

"They're on their way to a safe location as we speak," Steel confirmed. "The arena is clear of all civilians, thanks to the desert drake here."

"The name's Sun, just so you know," the Defender of Earth commented. "Not that it's...*crucial*...for you to know that. I'm just *saying*...in case you...cared. I mean, not that you *do*, but—"

"Yes," Steel said slowly. "Okay, *thank* you. Very random, but noted. But it's only the seven of us now, so I think we could *actually* use a plan about now."

*Wait, hold on a second. How is he getting seven? Meadow, Cotton, Sun, Fire, Steel, and me. That's only six.* Counting them off in his head,

Cloud frowned. "*Seven?"* he echoed. "Are you *sure*? Because I don't —"

"Sorry," Meadow interrupted nervously. "I'm *really* sorry, Cloud. I don't have time to explain it *right* now, but—"

"He's talking about *me*, Star," growled a low voice from next to Meadow, a voice that *hadn't* been there before. "*I'm* the seventh dragon."

"Wait, *Coal*?" Cloud attempted to twist toward the cool, emotionless tone of his former friend, but his brain was still fuzzy and disoriented from the number of sounds he was attempting to process all at once. Just putting a name with a voice was more trouble than it was worth. "*What* are you—"

"I came to assist," Coal went on, as though knowing the reasoning behind his actions needed to be explained. "What my father is doing..." He coughed, as though embarrassed to admit he'd been a part of it. "What *I* did," he amended, "is *wrong*. I understand that now. It's...it's *not* about what our parents have done. It's about what we are going to do. I spent...*so much time*...focused on trying to make my father be proud of me, that I lost sight of the one who was *already* proud of me, who was *willing* to call himself my friend and brother. And when the time came, I chose my father over him. I hurt you, Cloud. *Beyond* compare and that is a wrong that I *will* rectify, no matter *what* it takes."

"Well, could you *maybe* consider rectifying it *faster*?" Fire screeched. "I'm *beginning* to feel like a lamb for slaughter here!" He breathed out a surge of fire that Darkwhisperer effortlessly dodged, immediately following it up with a brash swing of his tail that flung the villain a wing's-width away.

*Does Coal really mean that?* Cloud wondered, tentatively listening for any hitch of dishonesty in the black drake's words. *After all of this, after* everything *he has done to us, does he* really *want to do what is right?*

*Or,* came the dark whisper from the depths of his conscience, *is this just another trick? We have already proven ourselves to be susceptible to*

*trickery. What's to stop him from pretending like he wants to help and then turning on us a second time the moment he gets the chance?*

And *then* he realized it didn't matter to him. Whether or not Coal was telling the truth didn't change *anything*. He was *there* and he was willing to fight against his own father when the easier option would have been to turn around and let them all perish. That was all the evidence Cloud needed. They had *one* chance to stop an insane dragon from destroying the galaxy and they were going to need all of the help they could get.

"All *right*," he growled, his mind officially made up. "What do we need to do to defeat Darkwhisperer? How did Clouddusk's team do it before?"

"They combined their powers into one gigantic discharge," Coal answered without hesitation. "Their hearts connected and they became one. Though the effects were temporary, it did the job required and while there were a few...*negative* side effects...the determination they shared was enough to open a rift and force Darkwhisperer out of the physical world and back into the Dark Realm."

"Well, that sounds *extremely* sappy," Cotton remarked, only for her brother to shush her with a wing to the snout.

"Sappy or no, it worked," Coal retorted.

"B-but," Meadow interjected. "T-that much power...didn't it *kill* them?"

"Did I *mention* the negative side effects?"

"Well, we definitely aren't going to do *that*!" Cotton snapped. "I believe the *whole idea* of this prophecy was for us to *survive* and *end* the war and be *victorious*."

"Technically," Coal argued, *"nowhere* in the prophecy did it say you were going to survive. It just said you were going to *win*."

"Well, how *stupidly vague* of a prophecy *could you make?*"

"Could there be another way?" Cloud interjected, pushing his way between them before they lost sight of their main purpose—or before Fire lost his edge over the Monterrian ghost.

"Not that I know of," Coal answered. "I think this is it."

Cloud took a deep breath, summoning all his courage into what he would say next; the *plan* they had been waiting for. "Then that's what we'll have to do," he decided. "We *can't* let Darkwhisperer win, no matter what. If this is the way, then this is what must be done. Our worlds are at stake and we can't let Darkwhisperer destroy everything we have worked so hard to achieve, so I am asking you; will you help me save the universe?"

He waited, but only silence met his bold proclamation. He couldn't see their faces, couldn't read their expressions, but he could sense their uncertainty nevertheless. They were *terrified* and he wished desperately that he could find some way to reassure them that this *was* the right thing to do. Clouddusk had selected them for this responsibility. *This* was their destiny, but were they really willing to sacrifice *everything* for it?

He knew *he* was. This was his chance, the opportunity he'd waited for his *entire* life, the moment to prove to everyone that he wasn't like his ancestors. Saving the universe from a Dark Realm-bent psychopath in a spectacular and *flashy* manner would *definitely* prove that point but would it really help change their opinions of him? Would dragons go on hating his kind without taking the time to get to know him or would they finally accept their errors and move forward in a more peaceful manner like his team had learned to do?

Yes, he was *willing* to risk his life if it meant protecting those who could not.

But the others had *much* more to lose than he did. Cotton had an entire kingdom to rule, Sun had his Queen and his honor to protect, Meadow and Fire still had a long way to go in their lives and with their unique gifts, there were *so many* dragons they could help. It would be selfish of him to ask them to turn down possibly their *entire future* for this.

But that was *exactly* what he was doing. He *needed* them. Without them he could do nothing and there would be no future for *hundreds* of others and that's why the talons of fear surrounding his throat seemed to grow tighter the longer the silence extended.

*After everything we've been through together, they're still afraid.*

*I'm afraid too.*

*Afraid that I'll let them down; that I'll let everyone down. The fate of the world is in our talons and it feels so* massive. *Clouddusk warned us of what we were up against when he had the chance, but* now *I'm not sure we were prepared for what we would face* at all.

It had been those very same fears that had permitted Darkwhisperer access into the mortal world, the fears of inadequacy and distrust belonging to five hatchlings brought together under the direst of situations in the effort to prevent that very event from occurring. It was up to them to make it right again.

"*I* will."

Sun's voice broke through the unease, strong and assured. "I *will*," he repeated, "if that is what it takes to protect my sister and brothers from all of this. I don't want them living in a ruined, war-ravaged world of Darkwhisperer's design."

"Yeah," Meadow added quietly. "Me too. I-I mean, me either. I-I m-mean...I'll help too. W-we've already come t-this far, r-right?"

"I *think* I'm already invested!" Fire howled, dipping and weaving under another blow. Darkwhisperer's talons struck his shoulder and both dragons hissed, though for different reasons. "Can whatever little huddle you're having over there *move along, pretty please?*"

"Cotton?" Cloud asked gently, but urgently. They were running out of time. "Are you with us?"

The princess hesitated. "My kingdom needs me," she said softly to no one in particular.

"But these dragons *also* need you," Steel pointed out reasonably.

"And if you *don't* stop this maniac, I don't know how much Raynbowfalles will be left to rule. I love you, sis, but you don't need *me* to tell you what you should do."

Cotton sighed. "I know and I love you too. All right," she added, "I'll help. You boys would be completely lost without me anyway."

"All *right!"* Sun cheered. "Let's go win this!"

"Hold on a minute!" Cloud added anxiously before they could get themselves too worked up and leap into danger with talons drawn blindly. "What about *you* two?" he questioned, turning back toward Coal and Steel. "No offense but you can't really hurt Darkwhisperer and he *can* kill *you.*"

"That's all right," Coal growled. "We can *still* help. We can lure him away while you five get into position. He won't be expecting two mere mortals to try and stop him."

The way he said *mere mortals* made Cloud wonder just how mere they *actually* were. There was...just something about the two of them that he couldn't quite place, something...*different.* A power festering around them that he couldn't explain.

Though he couldn't see him, Cloud knew Steel was nodding along in agreement. There was no point in arguing now. They were determined. And honestly, he wasn't sure how much longer Fire could hold out on his own against a dragon *three times* his size and strength. "All right," he gave in, stretching out his wings and getting ready to kick off. "But *be careful*! The *rest* of you, call on your powers and come with me!"

He wheeled around as he spoke, already drawing as much light and water into his jaws as he could muster. If his magic had been strong enough to defeat an army of bodiless Shades; all of which had been created by the same dark magic, then *perhaps* he could do just as much damage against their creator.

At least, he *hoped* so.

He slammed into Darkwhisperer at full speed, digging his talons

underneath the shoulder scales of the Monterrian and sending them both tumbling into the sand.

"You *fool*!" Darkwhisperer sneered, twisting back and raking his claws across Cloud's chest. The hatchling howled, lurching around to bite the black dragon's forearm. Darkwhisperer hissed in fury and snapped his massive tail into the hatchling's jaw. It collided with Cloud's snout and the blue drake flew backward onto the solid pavement, gasping as sharp pain blossomed through every nerve in his body.

Darkwhisperer lunged for him again, jaws wide and teeth flashing deadly. "Now you *die*--ARRGH!"

"Not today!" Fire roared, appearing from the left and smashing once more into the villain's side, knocking him clear of Cloud for the *second* time.

The smell of burning flesh sent Cloud gagging as he staggered back up, ears pinned back as the running talonsteps of his teammates bolting up behind him. "Fire!" he yelled as Sun reached over to grasp his forelimbs and help him up.

"Don't worry! I've got him!" the jungle hatchling barked. More scuffling followed as the two continued to struggle ferociously.

"We'll hold him back!" Steel shouted, materializing nearby and bounding into the fray without a moment of hesitation. "You go help the others!"

"Raynbow drake, flank the left!" Coal ordered. "Watch out for his right hook and *don't* get yourself toasted!"

"Yes, sir...*whoa*!" His talons kicked up sand as he skidded and slid across the uneven surface. "Big claws! *Big claws*!"

Growling angrily, Fire propelled away from Darkwhisperer and circled back to Cloud in a fiery plume of rage. "Everybody ready to end this?" he growled to the others.

"Definitely," Sun remarked.

"Let's get it over with then," Cotton rumbled, wheeling around on his right and making room for Meadow to squeeze in between them. The littlest drake was shaking profusely but he, like the rest of them, refused to run away.

"Everyone activate your powers!" Cloud ordered, feeling his talons beginning to tingle with apprehension as the water boiled into his throat. "We may only have one shot at this!"

"One shot at *what*, exactly?" Sun asked, even as the sand beneath their feet shifted and rumbled angrily, an echo of the student's sentiment.

"We have to do what Coal said," Cloud replied. "We *have* to combine our powers. Alone we don't have the strength to defeat someone as powerful as this, but *together* we can end this once and for all. Clouddusk believed in us when he found us and brought us together. We were nobodies before, the universe tried to reject us and our tribes did not accept us for who we were, but that was their mistake. They didn't believe in us, but *he* did, and *now* it is time to believe in ourselves. *This* is what we were born for. *This* is our last stand. We either win here and save the world, or we die trying. *Together."*

"Together," Cotton snarled.

"Together," Sun and Fire repeated.

"T-together for a-always," Meadow chirped.

"*Together we can save the world and stop the bad guy and spread* peace *and* love *throughout the galaxy!"* Darkwhisperer suddenly sneered. Coal and Steel shrieked and the weight of their bodies *thudded* to the earth as the massive dragon once more turned his focus on the small group of outcasts. "You *pathetic* dragonets know nothing *about peace!"*

He unhinged his jaw and let loose a tremendous billow of fire. The hatchlings scattered, Fire momentarily dousing the bite of his scales to hook a wing around Cloud and drag him to safety.

"Hey!" Sun snapped. "Watch where you're blasting that thing there, dude! You *almost* hit us!"

"Is this *really* the best time to be *antagonizing* the villain trying to kill us?" Cotton protested, appearing beside him, the warmth from her magic overflowing into Cloud's nerves.

Sun snorted, but it was easy to tell he was afraid. "It *worked*, didn't it?"

Apparently, it had, for moments later, the earth-shaking footsteps were charging for them again. Sun intercepted the rush, ambushing the larger dragon by tearing the arena apart at the seams. The ground ruptured at their feet, creating a tangible cleft between the teens and the black Defender

Darkwhisperer, instead of being confused by this unusual tactical choice, merely chuckled. "An *interesting* approach, I must confess, and not unlike one of a skilled warrior. You have a *very* unique mind, young drake. It's *unfortunate* that I will have to rip it apart to find out how you tick."

"You'll have to *catch* us first," Cotton sneered. "And *so far,* you haven't even been able to *touch* us. Not on Tundrae and *definitely* not in the Dream Realm. You claim to be so great and powerful, but you've done *nothing* to earn that title. *Stars*, you couldn't even kill five unsuspecting dragonets! Perhaps the legends *overexaggerated* how dangerous you *actually* are."

"*C-Cotton*!" Meadow squeaked, alarmed by her sudden boldness. "What are y-you d-*doing*?"

"Saving our tails," she retorted. "Since *someone* around here has to."

"No, I think you're digging our graves *for* us!" Sun cried. "You're just making him *angrier*!"

"Good!"

Darkwhisperer hissed, his next words breathy with disbelief. "You think you're so *great?"* Thudding pawsteps alerted Cloud to the dragon's movements and his ears swiveled forward as the villain

plowed into his *long*-winded reasoning for villainy. "You think that Clouddusk chose you because you were uniquely gifted and somehow suited to defend the galaxy? *You* five; a group of *mistakes* and *rejects*, led by one of the most feared dragons in the *cosmos?* You are nothing more than *puppets* in the twisted game my brother has been preparing for *decades*. He sent you to kill me because *I* know the truth. I know who he *really* is."

"Oh, *yeah?"* Cotton fired back. "Well, we know who *you* really are, Dark Night! We've all heard the stories about how you killed so many of those innocent dragons and how you ravaged and destroyed entire civilizations and there's *no way* in the Dark Realm we would stand by and let you do that to our worlds!"

"I've always *despised* that name," the Monterrian sneered. "Dark Night. A fictitious identity made out to make me seem like nothing more than a hatchling's fantasy. But let me ask you this, Princess, do I seem like a fairy tale to *you?"*

Cloud *almost* heard the fire coming in time. "Cotton, *move*!" he roared, his wings shooting out unsteadily as he started to lunge between her and the blast.

However, Meadow got there first, and Cloud was relieved to hear the *thump* of two bodies hitting the ground and the separate groans emanating from each.

"Holy stars, are you guys *all right?"*

"*Urgh,"* Cotton groaned. "I...could be...*better*..."

"Easy for you to...to s-say," Meadow moaned. "You're...*squishing* me..."

"Well, if you weren't so *pathetically* minnow-sized, then we wouldn't have to worry about that, *would* we?"

"Not the time, guys!" Sun snapped as he whirled by, the brute power rippling beneath his claws surfacing for the first time as the sand once more began to rumble to life. "*Focus* on the dude trying to kill us! You can argue later!"

"R-right!" Meadow stammered, his snout *surely* flushed with embarrassment.

"Oh, very well, but *don't* think this conversation is over, trout-sniffer."

"Our powers are up and ready for action, Captain!" Fire interrupted, leaping in from his right. "Awaiting your order to fire!"

"What about Darkwhisperer?" Cloud demanded.

"He's...charging...his powers again," Sun interjected. "Like he did before. You remember? At the caves? He has to take a minute to recover before he can fire another blast like that."

"Well, let's not give him that opportunity!" Cloud growled. "Fire, Cotton, on my left! Sun, Meadow, my right! On my mark, launch your power toward the sky!"

"The *sky*?" Sun queried. "Why not just fire *right at* this toad and *blast* him off the face of the planet once and for all?"

"Quantum entanglement," Meadow answered before Cloud could speak. "If we attack with a headlong bout, there's no telling *what* chaos would ensue. We could rip apart the very confines of space and time, *just* like Clouddusk and his team did when they confronted him the first time. Our magic individually is *extremely* powerful. A combined attack could wipe out all existence as we know it."

"We'll have to be careful then," Cotton growled, "but we're not getting anywhere by standing here and talking this through! We need to blast this deceitful snake back to where he came from *right* now!" Light sizzled through her body, shoving and spitting against Cloud's own sparks.

"*Right*!" the others said together.

"All right, on three then! Let's send Darkwhisperer packing once and for all!" Cloud growled, detecting the power building within his core as he dug in his talons and braced himself for what was coming.

Darkwhisperer snarled from his place across the rift, but with no magic remaining to fight back, there was *nothing* he could do to stop the hatchlings from unleashing their attack. Dark power encompassed his body, but it remained weak.

*This* was their chance.

"All together now! Brace yourselves! *One*!"

"We're with you, Cloud," Coal growled as he and Steel dropped down on either side of the team and pushed themselves in beside them.

"One hundred percent!" Meadow added. "We can do this! *Two*!"

Determination boiled through Cloud's being. Meadow was right. They *could* do this. Whether or not they had known it, Clouddusk had been preparing them for this battle for *since* their birth. Coal, him, *all* of them. This was a moment nineteen years in the making and he wasn't going to be facing it alone.

*Thank you everyone,* he silently whispered to the others. *For* everything. *You helped me see who I could be and you gave me a chance when no one else would have. Win or lose now, you're all my friends, and I wouldn't change a thing.*

He could feel their power building around him. Fire, Light, Weather, and Earth. They were ready. *Waiting.* All they needed was the final element. *His* element. He felt it welling up to the surface and he squared his shoulders, ready and willing to thrust forth his magic one last time.

"*Three*!" he roared, hearing his words rise above the stillness of the battlefield. "Let's *do* this!"

"TOGETHER!" they screamed.

For the first time, their voices collided to become one. Determination rang in Cloud's ears as everything *exploded* into turmoil.

The magic erupted from Cloud's talons so rapidly that he stumbled

and for a split moment, everything swam into perfect focus. He watched the blue light from separated jaws spiral through the air, suspending over their heads in a brilliant display of power. All around him, he saw similar things happening to the others. Lightening erupted from Meadow's claws, while a fierce red glow built up around Fire's body and twin sets of light shot from Sun and Cotton. All four powers spun upwards to meet with his.

He grimaced, feeling his strength rapidly draining from his body.

In a single moment, Steel and Coal dove away from Darkwhisperer and the others, taking shelter underneath a crumbling ledge with Coal using his wings to shield the smaller drake underneath him. His father, realizing what was happening, let out a furious roar and once again formed his own kind of dark fire. He launched it at them, but it was *already* too late.

The light encompassed the team and collided into one massive array of light, bolder and brighter than any sun and *twice* as massive as Snowfalle's largest moon.

This was the *true*, undeniable power of the Defenders.

But at the same time, consciousness was slipping out from Cloud's grasp. His vision faded back to nothingness and he staggered, caught abruptly by Sun and Fire as he fell. They were trembling as well, and it was clear they wouldn't be able to hold their own for much longer. Cloud's heart sank as the realization struck. The two drakes were *exhausted*. He could hardly imagine Meadow or Cotton fairing more favorably. What would happen if they all collapsed before the spell was complete and Darkwhisperer were given the chance to recover his power?

"*Whoa!*" Steel gasped. "What *is* that?"

"*That's* the spell," Coal answered, breathless and in awe. "The one performed by the Winged Five that defeated my father all those centuries ago. They've *done* it."

Darkwhisperer seemed to realize it too. The flames whooshed past Cloud's face and dissipated against the force of power being forced

out through the hatchlings' bodies, but the black dragon was already moving back into a dangerous position. He was out of time and out of options.

The heroes had won.

"No!" Darkwhisperer howled. "I won't go back again! You insolent beasts cannot defeat me! *Coal*!" he cried, finally locating his son cowering near the edge of the pit. "Coal, *help me!* You know what's going to happen to me if I go back there! You *can't* let them do this! STOP THEM!"

Coal did not speak and certainly made no effort to save his doomed kin. Steel mumbled something that no one other than him could hear and the black drake drew in a sharp breath and Cloud could envision the piercing glare being directed at the villain.

"*No."*

This was followed by a tremendous explosion, rocking the earth and sending the two observing drakes recoiling for cover. The hatchlings screamed and their connection was immediately severed. Even through damaged pupils, Cloud could *see* the light around them fade and vanish from existence. Their time was up. The magic was gone, siphoned from their bodies just like their strength had been

*Speaking* of strength...

His legs gave out and he slumped even more against his teammates. Everything was on fire. He couldn't think straight. He couldn't think *at all*. Was this it? Was he dying? Was this what dying *felt like*? He couldn't move. He *wanted* to. He wanted to see the others, he wanted to *be sure* they were all right...to...to *protect* them.

Suddenly, Fire and Sun let go of him and he fell hard against the sand. He didn't feel his body touch down or the scorching heat of the desert below him. He couldn't feel *anything* other than the flames consuming his veins, rushing for his heart, encompassing his brain...

*Footsteps.*

*Dragon's* footsteps. Hurrying toward him. He could not see them. He was scarcely conscious of gentle talons brushing against his wings, lifting him into the air and carrying him away from the arena. Where was Darkwhisperer? Was he back in the Dark Realm? He *had* to be. They *must* have won. He *felt* safe. There was *no way* Darkwhisperer could have escaped that blast, right?

"Careful!" someone hissed into his left ear. "He's hurt!"

"*Gentle*!" someone else growled from his right. "We've got to get him to a healer right now!"

"CLOUD!" Coal screamed from somewhere in the distance. "CLOUD, WAKE UP!"

"What about the others?" spoke the first voice. "Should we take them too? They *are* alive, aren't they?"

*My team!* He tried to shout, but it came out as a pitiful whimper. *Help my team, please!*

"Just *barely,"* another snorted. "The jungle and raynbow seem pretty tough. They should be fine. Guess we'll have to wait and see about the others, won't we?"

Exhaustion finally crept its way into his brain. All he wanted to do was sleep. Was that *wrong*? Somehow, he felt like that was wrong. Was he supposed to stay awake in this kind of situation? He couldn't remember, but it didn't matter. He couldn't fight it off...he didn't really want to. The fight was over. They had *won*. The prophecy had been fulfilled. Dragnaple was *safe*.

*We did it.*

"CLOUD!"

Through the pain, the smallest of satisfied smiles spread across his maw...and then he relaxed and let the darkness overtake him.

# Chapter 27

*3 weeks later...*

The morning air over Snowfalle was crisp and filled with the hint of rain. The sleeping forests were beginning to stir, and the sun was peeking above the horizon, casting rays of pale golden light across the valleys. The world was silent, and for the first time in a long while, it felt at peace.

The war was over.

No more fear.

No more death.

And it was all due to one blue dragon's selfless sacrifice.

A troop of dragons swept across the plains, tussling the grass and upsetting the motionless puddles. Their wings cut through the silence. The earth shook with every beat, and the trees seemed to bow down as they passed.

Cloud tilted his wings, letting the sun wash over his scales, and reflect the blue onto the nearby landscape. He turned his head, listening as the rest of his team flew up beside him, laughing about something or another. He smiled in their direction. They paused for a moment, and Cloud was sure they were grinning back.

*This is what it means to be accepted*, he thought once again.

It still felt surreal to him, and he honestly didn't remember a lot of what had happened after they had combined their powers. He'd been told, later on, that Darkwhisperer had been blown to smithereens, and then Cloud had passed out. He didn't know if he actually believed Darkwhisperer was dead (after all, could a dragon really die twice?), but there had been no further incidents during the week that he was unconscious.

According to the doctors, he'd been teetering on the brink of death. The spell *should have* killed him, they said. That it hadn't had proven that he was a miracle, even more so than his blue scales. He had been the last to come around, and the team had waited patiently by his bedside for him to wake up so they could tell him the news.

Dragnaple had been saved and rebuilding had already begun. With a little convincing on Steel's part, Meadow had gotten a job overseeing all of the reconstruction, a dream come true for the littlest hatchling (which probably explained why he came in caked in sand and cement, but with a big grin plastered all over his face), and he had been given permission, by both Cotton and Steel, to build a home at Skoutia, a permanent place to call his own.

Cotton had briefly returned to Raynbowfalles to check in on her mother and father. Once she was certain they were all right, she'd came right back and had worked side by side with Meadow to rebuild Sun's home, a feat Cloud had never anticipated was possible from her. She was still the bossy, snippity dragon she had always been, but a new air of wisdom had been added to her gait and shone in her eyes. She now understood that there was more to the world than what she wanted, and she was taking full strides to mend all of the errors she'd made in the past.

Fire hadn't gone home yet. He claimed that he wouldn't leave until he was sure that *every one* of his teammates would recover, but even after Cloud was healed, he put off the journey. Cloud wondered what had happened between him and his family, or why he wouldn't want to go back and see them, but when he'd asked, Fire'd just shrugged it off and said he'd deal with it later. Cloud wondered if that *later* would ever come.

Sun had probably been the most affected out of all of them. After all, it had been his world that had been damaged, possibly never to be repaired completely. But that hadn't deterred him. He still could be seen flying with the team most every day, he still cracked corny jokes at the most random of times, and he still loved his family dearly. He'd even convinced his sister, Armadillo, to come meet Cloud one day at the hospital. She had reminded Cloud *a lot* of Sun, just with a more bubbly personality...if that was even possible.

And then there was *him*. The blue dragon. The one everyone feared and wanted to destroy. The hero-wannabe.

Not anymore. After seeing how he'd fought to protect them, the rulers of all the tribes held a meeting to determine his fate. They ruled that, as long as he promised to abide by the guidelines of the Realms, *and* promised to continue defending them, they would allow him to roam their kingdoms as a free citizen.

Of course Cloud had jumped at the chance. Currently, he had decided to continue living in his old cave, though it felt a bit empty without Coal (who was currently facing trial on half of the known realms). From time to time, however, he would visit the others and see how they were getting along, sometimes arriving in time to break apart unnecessary skirmishes and misunderstandings. He had become known as Dragnaple's Protector, a title he was sure none of his kind had ever worn.

As for his eyesight, Meadow kept his word, and as soon as he awoke, the green hatchling set to work. Unfortunately, he determined the damage was too extensive, and that there was nothing he could do. The healers said the same.

So Cloud was blind. Well, when he considered the other possible alternatives, he didn't think that was too bad after all. And he'd begun to get the hang of things this way. His hearing and mind were strong enough for him to guess what the others were doing a good lot of the time, though they loved to try and keep him guessing.

They flew to a large plateau among the mountain range, and landed among the tiny greenery. The wind blew sharply from there, and Sun held out a wing to stop Meadow from overshooting and diving off the opposite edge.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" Cloud asked them, lifting his head to sniff the fresh breeze.

"It is," Cotton agreed. "Have you been here before? I can see all the way to the Realm Portal from here! Up north are the mountains, and down south is the sea."

Cloud nodded. He could picture its immense beauty, and only half-wished he could see it for himself. "This is what we saved," he reminded them. "This is what we are defending."

They stood for a moment in silence, just taking in the peace of the land.

"So, what do we do now?" Fire questioned. "Darkwhisperer is defeated. We can go back to our own lives, back to the way it was before."

"Yeah," Sun said sadly. "I guess you're right."

"But we learned a lot from this, didn't we?" Meadow inquired, bounding up behind them. "The Realms aren't the only things that we've changed. *We've* changed too, right?"

"Definitely," Cloud agreed.

"Well, I have to be getting back home soon," Cotton remarked. "Princess duties and all that fun stuff. From there, I don't know what I'll do."

"Rule an *entire planet*?" Sun suggested innocently.

"All right, yes, *of course*, scorpion-brain." Cotton whacked him across the nose. "I *meant*, after all of this, my life is going to seem pretty boring. I'll never be able to look at sparring class the same."

"You make that sound so tragic," Fire laughed.

"Maybe I should let *you* take my place one week," Cotton sniffed. "I think you'd gain *quite a different opinion* on the matter."

"Nah," Fire declined. "I'd probably just burn something."

Cotton peered at him for a moment. "You would," she determined. "Forget that plan then. But, *really,* what is everyone going to do after this?"

Cloud hadn't really thought about it, and it felt like a stone sinking further and further into his gut. What *was* he going to do now? He

wasn't confined to one place any longer. He could go anywhere he wanted, *do* anything he wanted. But now that he had the chance, he wasn't sure what he wanted. "I don't know," he admitted. "What are...what are you all going to do?"

"I'm going to search for my family," Meadow answered as he stretched his wings tiredly. "Coal said they were still alive. He told me to look close to home, so I might go back to Watterlaek."

"Good idea," Fire told him. "Maybe someone there knows them, or had known them. If you need any help..." He trailed off there, leaving the invitation open.

"I'll be sure to let you know," Meadow promised. "Thanks. They're out there somewhere. I *know* it."

"You'll find them," Sun assured him. "I bet they miss you as much as you miss them. They're probably looking for you too."

"Maybe," Meadow said, though he didn't sound like he was very convinced. "But what about the rest of you?"

"I'm going back to school," Sun answered proudly. "One more year, and I'll be a first-rank soldier."

"Congratulations," Cloud and Fire said together.

"And you?" Sun asked Cloud.

"I...I don't know honestly," Cloud admitted. "Maybe fly around a bit? Explore the world. Always wanted to do that. In the end, though, I think I'll end up doing something here." He shrugged, opening a wing and gesturing to the realm around him.

"You know, you could always come back to Raynbowfalles with me," Cotton invited. "I'm sure Meadow would like another set of talons around Skoutia."

"No, thanks," Cloud answered. "I'm not much of a builder." He shook out his talons and pretended to gaze across the land. "Do you think we'll ever be needed again? The five of us together, I mean?"

"I don't know," Cotton answered. Cloud jumped as she placed a wing around his shoulders. He twisted toward her in surprise. She ignored his reaction. "But, if Darkwhisperer ever *does* find another way out of the Dark Realm, we'll be here, waiting for him."

*Together. We'll be here, together.*

"I know we will," Cloud replied. And with that, the five of them launched off into the sky.

None of them knew what the future would hold, but whatever it was, they knew they would face it *together*.

After all, they were Defenders.

And this was *their* world now.

# Epilogue

**Warning: Fantasy violence, gore, death**

A dark tail slithered through the parted grass and two wide blue eyes glistened against distant ribbons of lightning. Below him, angry waves bashed against the rocks and were dashed to pieces instantly against the rage of an oncoming storm, but he paid no mind to the looming nimbuses, his eyes transfixed on something *far beyond* the threat of the ravine.

His talons curled against the shallows of the earth and the growl rolled into his throat as the first droplets of hot rain began to putter down against his horns. Fresh wounds across his chest and snout stung acidic and he bit his tongue to swallow back any more noises of complaint.

No weakness. He could show *no* weakness now. He needed to be strong. He had done the *right* thing. For *him.* For *all* of them. It was done. There was no backing out now.

"*So,* I see the sniveling *rat* decided to come crawling back to me *after all. What* an *unexpected surprise."*

The voice was behind him and in front of him and on *every* side all at once. He froze, backstepping toward the cliff's edge, but he *refused* to be afraid, to lower his ears, to turn tail and *flee.* Those were the actions of a coward and he *never* wanted to be seen as a coward *again.*

The snarl was already bubbling to the surface as he pinpointed the source of the sneer. With a flick of his ears, he whipped back the way he had come, finding the massive beast of reckless vengeance planted in his path, amber eyes burning deadly fire. Burning with *betrayal.* Burning with *hate.*

*"Father,"* Coal retorted, his voice just as steeled and heartless. "I should have *known* I'd find you here." He drew his wings closer to

his body as he gestured with one claw to the deserted crag. "This place *seems* deserted enough. *Perfect* for someone like you to mull in your loss, right?"

Darkwhisperer wasn't amused. His forked tongue slithered in and out of his fangs as he sustained his piercing glare, the muscles in his shoulders tensed, bunched and ready to strike. Coal noticed this and arched his back, ready to react at the first signs of an attack. The villainous dragon *knew* he had sided with the hatchlings and had helped bring him down. It was *dangerous* for him to even come back now. But he *had* to try. Darkwhisperer was still his kin. He *had* to give him a chance to reason, *even* if he didn't deserve it.

It was what Cloud would have wanted him to do.

And so he stood strong even in the face of almost certain death because, for the *first* time in his nineteen years of life, he knew who he was and where he stood, and if it was going to get him killed, then so be it. He *knew* he was going to go out doing the right thing.

"*Perhaps*," Darkwhisperer sneered, "but you did not return here simply to revel in your betrayal, *did* you? That would be *very* foolish on your part, *especially* now when I know where your...*loyalties*...lie."

"No," Coal answered cooly. "I came back to tell you that it's *over*. I'm *done* playing your *stupid* fantasy games so you can go find yourself a new pawn."

Darkwhisperer blinked, not seeming as furious as Coal had been anticipating. "I *see*. And what has brought on *this* sudden stream of good consciousness? You've never had trouble lying and deceiving the drake *before*. You even *swore* you would find a way to eliminate him from the equation should the need arise. I *should have known* you were too *weak*."

"I'm *not* weak!" Coal growled, lashing his tail for emphasis.

"Then what do *you* call it then*, traitor*?" the massive drake snarled. "You *turned* on your own kin, your own *blood*, because you cared about a group of *pathetic* rejects. Their weakness has *stained* you.

Your alliance with the cursed drake led you astray and your allegiance to his cause was your downfall."

"It was not *my* downfall," the black hatchling countered, blood roaring through his ears as he drew in his claws, the throbbing sensation growing stronger just below the surface. Just a little bit longer and then the feelings could be quenched forever. "It was *yours*. But you *still* don't get it, do you?" He uncurled his talons and stepped away from his father, his heart throbbing in his ribcage. He had never felt so determined, so *sure* of himself. "You don't *understand* what defeated you. Perhaps I should pity you for that, but I don't. You don't deserve such love, not from the Realms, and *certainly* not from me. Cloud taught me *more* about respect and responsibility than you *ever* did and he's more part of my family than you will *ever* be.  You're no father to me. You're a *monster*."

Hot plumes of disgust billowed from the older dragon's snout. "You think he'll *ever* care about you, you treacherous snake? Perhaps he was just using you, just as *I* have always been. He's seen your true nature. What's to stop him from *abandoning* you now that he doesn't need you anymore? And once he does, you'll come running back to *me* with your tail between your legs."

"No," Coal said, emotionless. "I won't."

His talons raised before either of them could protest and, in one swift movement, they sliced across the bigger drake's throat. Darkwhisperer didn't scream, didn't even flinch, even as he clutched the open wound and the blood pouring from within. He staggered backward, his wings flaring open in silent alarm, and he opened his jaws to splutter out curses, but only managed to spit red liquid.

Coal stepped forward to glare at his once-great enemy, blue eyes colder than death. Darkwhisperer toppled onto his forelegs, heaving, coughing up his insides. "He may not need me anymore," he growled, "but, then again, neither do *you*. And I *don't* intend to let you go back on your word. You were *never* going to spare his life after you got what you wanted and I was an idiot to *ever* think you *would*."

Darkwhisperer wheezed, his head drooping in reluctant submission

before the younger drake. "You...think *this* can...*stop* me?" he hissed. "I'll find...*another* way...back...and I'll kill...that...drake...and everyone else...who you love. It is...my fate."

"Your *fate* ends here," Coal sneered. "You taught me the ways of the Dark Realm well. I *know* that once your body has been absorbed into these woods, the only way back is through the dreams of others. That's how you escaped the first time, by using Cloud's fear against him. But *how* do you intend to escape when you have no body left to sustain you?"

Darkwhisperer offered no reply, just another vomit of sticky bile.

Coal shoved him over onto his back, staring down into his kin's dulling eyes. "So, *as* I said *before*, it's *over*. Rest in ruins. You *deserve* it."

The black dragon glowered for a moment longer before he drew back for one last massive heave of unreachable oxygen and his head lolled lifelessly to the side, the fire fading from his soul one final time.

Blood pooled at the base of Coal's claws, but the hatchling just shook away the liquid crimson, wiping the evidence away against a cluster of crumpled leaves. Then, with a snort of contempt and a vicious swipe of his tail, the youngest and sole heir of Night drew his wings into his body and vanished into the shadows.

# Author's Note #2

So, I see you have returned.

Was my superior writing too much for your human minds to comprehend?

Oh, don't look so offended, I am only jesting. It was a dragon joke. Ha ha.  Do humans do jokes? Never mind. Anyway, if you've made it this far, that means you have successfully completed the first book of our noble history, and perhaps to have learned something during your time with us?

Now, this is only a rough draft. I may be the high-scroll-keeper, but as Meadow annoyingly keeps pointing out, no dragon is perfect, and neither is this report.

I await your criticisms.

And, as the saying goes, all good things must come to a close. Fortunately, that is not the case here. You have only scratched the surface of our mystical world, and there are so many things left for you to discover... that is, if you are brave enough to continue.

But for now, I'm afraid we have reached the close of our story, so until next time, this is the end.

Signed,

*Tundrablitz, High-Scroll Keeper of the Frost Dragon Tribe.*

**The adventure continues...**

***Kingdoms Falling .***

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